

The Blood of the Martyrs is the Seed of Life: Liberation Theology, Martyrdom, and the Prophetic Dimension of Theology

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INTRODUCTION

The topic of martyrdom usually brings to mind the martyrs of the early church who were persecuted under the Roman Empire. Tradition has Tertullian declaring, regarding those martyrs, that “the blood of the [martyrs] is the seed [of the church]” (*semen est sanguis Christianorum*) (Tertullian 1986: L).¹ According to the early church, “martyrs” were those Christians of exceptional quality and faithfulness who willingly surrendered their lives in the face of pressure to deny their confession of Christ. And the early church was filled with such martyrs: Peter the apostle, James the son of Zebedee, Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Origen, and Cyprian are just a few of the more famous ancient martyrs. The logic of Tertullian’s dictum lies in the fact that these deaths did not have the effect that their killers intended—the destruction of the fledgling Christian church. Rather, in some inexplicable fashion, these deaths only energized the ones they were intended to frighten and disperse, and the church grew.

This kind of martyrdom, death instead of apostasy, has been more prevalent at some points of Christian history than others, but it has always been a fact of the church’s existence. However, in our contemporary world another

¹ The statement by Tertullian, as it has come to be quoted popularly, includes “martyrs” and “of the church,” even though the original quote in *Apologeticus* has “Christians” in place of “martyrs” and lacks “of the church.” It is from this quote and a remark made by Jon Sobrino in Sobrino 1990b: 53 that the title of this paper is derived.

kind of martyrdom has become prominent, one that has probably also always been a fact of the church's existence, though not as celebrated as the type of martyrdom mentioned above. This second type is the martyrdom of those who have willingly accepted death in the course of their struggle for justice and the rights of the poor, against injustice and repression of the masses of people, largely in the third world. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Archbishop Oscar Romero are a few famous examples of this kind of martyr.

Martyrs are analogous to prophets in their function for the church and theology. The thesis of this paper is that reflection on past and present martyrs, when interpreted christologically, is an essential window into the *prophetic* dimension of Christian theology. The focus here will be on those contemporary martyrs in the service of justice, who were murdered because they spoke the truth compellingly, in a way that could not be ignored, because they perceived the truth when it was hardly decipherable. In short, I am speaking of those who were murdered because they spoke prophetically. No brand of theological reflection that intends to be prophetic can ignore the significance of martyrdom. For in confronting martyrdom we confront an undeniable witness to the truth. And only with such witness to the truth, which ultimately is Christ, do we stand within the sphere of the prophetic.

This is a thesis that I have adopted from Latin American liberation theology. Those who live in lands of poverty, repression, war, and murder are understandably more attuned both to the relevance of their martyrs *and* to the need for theology to be prophetic. We who live and work in the first world, sheltered as we are (though to some degree without excuse for that shelter), must listen to those from the third world whose Christian witness is indelibly informed and shaped by those among them who have shed blood, by those who have been tortured and murdered for their Christian commitment to justice and to the poor. In so doing it is possible to understand more profoundly the course of Jesus' life, the significance of his death, the hope of his resurrection, and the relevance of all of this for the world in which the church is called to be faithful.

This paper will first discuss the issue of defining martyrdom. The second section roots the "prophetic" dimension of theology in the Old Testament prophetic literature. The third major section examines liberation theologian Jon Sobrino's reflections on the martyrs of El Salvador. The fourth section focuses on the difficulty of interpreting the lives of martyrs and incorporating their witness into the work of theology. The final section will offer

some suggestions as to the significance of martyrdom for the prophetic dimension of theology's role in Christian witness.

DEFINING MARTYRDOM

The traditional understanding of martyrdom as the death of one who continues, in the face of persecution, to confess Christ or some piece of doctrine, is probably the customary Christian definition of the term "martyr." This type of martyrdom, which we might provisionally call the "martyrdom of confession," is a martyrdom that is rooted in some person's, group's, or nation's hatred of the faith (*odium fidei*). A prime biblical example is that of Stephen refusing to alter his preaching of the gospel so as to deflect the concerns of the high priest regarding the destruction of the temple and the change of the law (Acts 6:13-14). Following Stephen's long sermon, which culminated in his denunciation of the leaders: "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do" (7:51 NRSV), Stephen is dragged outside the city and stoned (7:58). In the course of his death, as Luke describes it, Stephen displayed the kind of attitude that became prototypical for the martyr: "While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them . . .'" (7:59-60a).

This story illustrates many of the features that came to be associated with martyrdom in Christian antiquity. Stephen submitted willingly to unjust death rather than relinquish his confession of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and he died calmly, with his thoughts not on his own suffering, but rather on God and on forgiving his murderers. As such, the text evokes the memory of Jesus' manner of death on the cross (see Brown 1997: 296).² Historian Carole Straw argues that this facet of ancient martyrdom was associated in the Christian mind with the conquering of death and was eventually correlated with the traditional Christian body-soul dualism. The martyr knew that death only touched the body, not the soul, and certainly not one's relationship with God. This was the case, as Straw writes, because "...the martyr's heroic death recapitulated Christ's paradoxical victory on the cross and anticipated the resurrection" (Straw 2002: 39).

² I owe this point to Jason J. Ripley.

The crucial aspect of this kind of martyrdom is the element of confession. It is the primary *casus mortis*. It is for confessing Christ or for believing some piece of orthodox doctrine regarding Christ that a martyr of confession is killed. This remains the understanding of the Roman Catholic Church to this day. Martyrdom is: “the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith: it means bearing witness even unto death. The martyr bears witness to Christ who died and rose, to whom he is united by charity. He bears witness to the truth of the faith and of Christian doctrine. He endures death through an act of fortitude.” (Vatican 1995: 2473).

It is impossible to deny the truth in this definition of martyrdom. Given the threat of torture and death in the face of pressure to apostatize, holding onto one’s faith and courage to confess it is a remarkable thing. It is little wonder that this sense of martyrdom has so captivated the Christian imagination and animated many Christians, past and present, in the bold confession of their faith. However, true as this definition may be, as important a dimension of Christian witness as it encapsulates, and therefore as *necessary* as this definition may be, is this a *sufficient* definition of martyrdom? Does it do justice to the multidimensional character of Christian commitment, as well as to the church’s historical experience of the different ways in which Christian witness has led certain Christians to death for their faith?

What about the murders of those who entered, out of the depths of their Christian commitment, into conflict on behalf of the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, for the cause of justice? To return to our original examples: (1) Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s commitment to Christ led him to oppose the Nazi destruction of Germany and annihilation of the Jewish people. For that reason the young pastor and theologian, who tended toward pacifism, became a part of an underground plot to kill Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer’s actions eventually led him to be hanged at Flossenburg on April 9, 1945. (2) Martin Luther King Jr.’s Christian commitment led him to take an active role in organizing blacks in the South to oppose inequality and racial oppression in the United States actively and peacefully, even though that jeopardized his life. King was shot on April 4, 1968 on the balcony of his room at the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis. (3) Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, a formerly conservative and anti-populist bishop, spent his three years in the archepiscopacy denouncing, in the name of Christ, the government and military forces that were repressing and massacring the people in the name of national security. Romero was gunned down at the altar of a small chapel in San Salvador on March 24, 1980.

As is apparent in these three famous examples, these martyrs died not simply on account of their confession of Christian faith or some aspect of doctrine. Rather, their deaths were the result of their solidarity with the oppressed and the decisions they made as a result. Here martyrdom is not inflicted by reason of hatred of the faith (though that may be implied in the actions of the killers), but by reason of hatred of justice (*odium iustitiae*) (Sobrino 2003:2; Limón 1993:714; Peterson 1997:95).

Therefore it is necessary to add this dimension of martyrdom, which we might provisionally call the “martyrdom of solidarity,” to the dimension of martyrdom of confession in order to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the reality of martyrdom. That this is the case is especially apparent if faith or Christian commitment is understood as a *total* response of the *whole* self to God’s self-revelation. If that is the case, then although word and deed, confession and acts of solidarity, can be distinguished from one another, they cannot be separated. They flow from the same fount of faith. Seen this way, the actions of Bonhoeffer, King, and Romero must be interpreted as functions of Christian confession—confession in deed as well as word. To focus solely on the dimension of confession as word would be to cut it off from the acts and ethical stances that confession informs. Karl Rahner, in a well-known quote, asks why Archbishop Romero should not be considered a martyr: “Why would not Monseñor Romero, for example, be a martyr? After all, he fell in the struggle for justice in society, fell in a struggle he waged from his deepest Christian convictions” (Rahner 1983, cited in Sobrino 2003:45). The converse is also true: the element of solidarity cannot be separated from the element of confession. Christian actions flow from an understanding of the Christian faith, a particular confession.

So the traditional definition must not cause us to neglect the martyrdom of solidarity. But today the danger is that the traditional definition may be forgotten, even though Christians today in many different parts of the world face persecution and threat of death simply for remaining Christian. This means that it is necessary to find the essential unity of the martyrdoms of confession and solidarity, in order to show that they are in fact *one* martyrdom. That unity consists in the fact that in both cases the person martyred is killed for attempting to maintain the true faith (either in confession, practice, or both) in the face of forces that are hostile to the confession or practice of the faith. Furthermore, in both cases the person martyred puts herself in this situation actively, but then passively accepts violence and death, rather than doing what is required to put herself out of harm’s way. Both types are

confessions of Christ, each in a different way. In both cases the person is a witness to the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus and the approach of the kingdom of God (see Balasundaram 1997:17).³

But the primary purpose of this paper is to show the relevance of martyrdom for the prophetic task of theology. How are these martyrs analogous to prophets? How is their witness a prophetic one? How can reflection upon these martyrs contribute to an understanding of theology's prophetic dimension? Answering these questions requires attention to the nature of the Hebrew prophetic literature.

HEBREW PROPHETIC LITERATURE AND THE PROPHETIC WITNESS OF THEOLOGY

Any investigation of the nature of biblical prophecy is beset with several difficulties. Chief among these difficulties is the eclectic nature of the prophetic corpus. As Walter Brueggemann writes: "The general phenomenon of prophecy in Israel is enormously diverse in its many manifestations. Any generalization about prophecy is likely to fail to comprehend the data, and yet our interpretive task of necessity entails an attempt at generalization" (1997: 622). This diversity is due mainly to the fact that the prophets are not in the business of making generalized declarations, but speak the word of Yahweh to the various situations in which they find themselves (Brueggemann 1997: 624). Another difficulty is the complicated task of using the prophets to understand the "prophetic" dimension of theology through the lens of the martyrs. This difficulty lies in the fact that, as the prophets and the martyrs are related to one another, it is necessary to recognize the *analogous* nature of the comparisons being made. As is so often the case in theology, the *mutatis mutandis* clause must be recognized, in order to respect both the unique nature of biblical prophecy and the very different character of the prophetic dimension of Christian theology. Keeping these warnings in mind, however, Brueggemann is right that interpretation requires some generalization. We must understand something about the central elements of the prophetic

³ Rahner's mediating definition encompasses both aspects: "Martyrdom, as it is understood today, is death for the sake of Christian faith or Christian morals" (1967:81). Jürgen Moltmann is another theologian who presents a multi-dimensional understanding of martyrdom (1993: 196-204).

message if we are to understand the prophetic dimension of Christian theology. These generalized features will be illustrated here by reference to the book of Amos.

A first feature of the message of the prophets is their denunciation of *sin* and corresponding announcement of *judgment*.⁴ Sin is a power, according to the prophets, that has permeated Israelite society and has pulled Israel from its proper relationship with Yahweh. It is difficult to miss the fact that the prevalent theme of Amos is the impending judgment of Yahweh against Israel. The very first words of Amos make this undeniable:

The LORD roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem;
the pastures of the shepherds wither, and the top of Carmel dries
up. (1:2, NRSV)

Then Amos launches into a series of denunciations of various nations, showing that Yahweh's judgment upon the nations *and* Israel is imminent (1:3-2:16). Just one example will suffice:

Thus says the LORD:
For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke
the punishment;
because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair
of sandals...
So, I will press you down in your place, just as a cart presses down
when it is full of sheaves.
...those who handle the bow shall not stand, and those who are
swift of foot shall not save themselves, nor shall those who ride
horses save their lives;
and those who are stout of heart among the almighty shall flee
away naked on that day,
says the LORD. (2:6, 13, 15-16)

Indeed, the whole of the book is a long strand of declarations of judgment and impending disaster (see, e.g., 3:2, 3:11, 3:14-15, 4:2-3, 6:8, 6:14, ch 7 passim, 8:2-3, 8:7-12, 9:1-10).

⁴ Indeed, this feature of denouncing sin and proclaiming judgment is so dominant in the prophetic corpus that Claus Westermann can use the oracles of judgment as the prototype of prophetic speech (Westermann 1991).

This general critique of sin and announcement of judgment manifests itself in a twofold focus on (1) social and political injustice; and (2) religious syncretism and misuse of the cult, as the grounds for that judgment. To be sure, if Yahweh is to be known as a truly *just* God, Yahweh's judgment must be based on something. The combined critique of worship and social behavior is based on the prophetic conviction that all of life is a unity, that all of life is related to Yahweh and therefore subservient to him (see Eichrodt 1961: 353, 364, 381ff.).

In Amos, one of the primary reasons for judgment is the various types of injustice that were being practiced. Gerhard von Rad describes it as such:

Actually, Amos shows us a society whose social life is cleft in two—a property-owning and therefore economically self-sufficient upper class lived at the expense of the 'little people', and the wrongs done were particularly apparent in the administration of justice, since only full citizens could sit and speak in the law courts; at the same time, however, as owners of property, these men were interested parties and, often enough, judges in their own cases; slaves, foreigners, orphans, and widows had no one to uphold their just claims. (1965: 135)

Amos thunders at those who are responsible for oppression of the poor:

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria,
 who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their
 husbands, "Bring something to drink!"
 The Lord God has sworn by his holiness: The time is surely coming
 upon you,
 when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with
 fish-hooks. (4:1-2; see also 5:7, 5:11, 6:12, 8:5-6)

The point is clear: such practices are incommensurate with Israel's status as the chosen nation.

This aspect is closely connected to the second major aspect of the prophetic denunciation of sin and warning of judgment—syncretism and perversion of the cult. Take for example what von Rad says of the suspicion that lay behind the prophecy of Elijah: "...[W]ere people still worshipping *Jahweh*? Was it not rather Baal, with his control over the blessings of the world of nature, who was now in their minds? For Baal was nonetheless Baal, even when invoked by the name *Jahweh*" (von Rad 1965: 15; cf. 53, 65; cf. Eichrodt

1961: 323, 330-1, 328, 340, 364ff). Amos threatens Judah for its rejection of the *torah* of the covenant (2:4).⁵ It is most apparent in chapter 4, in which Yahweh repeatedly accounts his acts of provision and salvation for Israel, each of which is concluded by the divine lament: “yet you did not return to me.” Amos also makes clear that this departure from the covenant had led to religious hypocrisy:

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
 Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings,
 I will not accept them;
 and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.
 Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
 But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (5:21-24; see also 2:7-8, 4:4-5, 5:25-27)

The message is clear: practicing various sacrificial rites and forms of worship will not curry Yahweh’s favor if the worshippers’ hearts and lives contradict the worship.

Closely linked to threats of judgment is the prophetic call to *repentance*. In fact, the possibility and necessity of repentance are implicit in the very announcement of judgment itself. In Amos this is evident in the divine laments of chapter 4, in which it is shown that the original bestowals of divine favor and providence were meant to prompt a “return” to Yahweh. The gap of time between the announcement of judgment and its fulfillment means that the threat is not absolute. There is still the possibility of changed hearts and lives. This is confirmed in Amos by texts that explicitly call Israel to change its ways and return to correct covenant-behavior:

Seek the LORD and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire,

⁵ von Rad claims that Old Testament theology has too easily ignored the essential role of the law for the prophets (1965:4-5). Brueggemann similarly argues that the concern for justice in the prophets is in fact a call to return to the Mosaic tradition and its covenantal demand of the practice of justice (1997: 644).

and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it...
 Seek good and not evil, that you may live;
 and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you
 have said.
 Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate;
 it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the
 remnant of Joseph. (5:6, 14-15)

Such texts show the conditional nature of the judgment that impends.

The very possibility of repentance implies the abiding presence of *hope* amidst terrible threats of judgment. Even a nation and persons who have lapsed into terrible sin are not beyond hope, provided they return to the covenant. But this hope is possible solely because of the mercy of Yahweh. In Amos, the power of hope is shown most strikingly by the book's conclusion, as Yahweh promises not to destroy Israel completely (9:8) and assures the future of Israel:

I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild
 the ruined cities and inhabit them;
 they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make
 gardens and eat their fruit.
 I will plant them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked
 up out of the land that I have given them,
 says the LORD your God. (9:14-15)

In all of this, what is most important about the prophetic message is that it claims to be the very revelation of Yahweh. That is to say, in everything the prophets do, their focus is not on themselves and their own role, but they continually point beyond themselves to the God who had previously delivered Israel from its oppression. Walther Eichrodt speaks of this as the task of bringing "a new total understanding of the will of Yahweh" to a situation which had degenerated into "a perversion of the whole conception of the divine-human relationship" (1961: 343, italics removed). In addition to revealing Yahweh's continuing desire for Israel to observe the *torah*, the prophets also reveal God's new message to Israel in her current situation. Eichrodt characterizes the prophet in this regard as "...the mediator through whom the divine life made its way into a world otherwise sealed against it" (1961: 326, italics removed). The so-called "messenger formula" which the prophets used to introduce their oracles serves to indicate that what follows is the "direct

word of God” (von Rad 1965: 37; cf. 56; 59; 68; Brueggemann 1997: 627-633; Preuss 1996: 73-76). Therefore the critique made of Israelite society, in all its dimensions, stemmed from the prophets’ experience of the divine. Their critique was not a human one, but from Yahweh himself.

Finally, we must not lose sight of the contested nature of this prophetic critique and revelation, lest we forget what made the prophets such apt vehicles for the word of Yahweh, and therefore so controversial in their day. Brueggemann states it well:

In principle, the prophets are uncredentialed. But because their utterances characteristically speak against dominant culture, either the buoyancy of dominant culture or its despair, it is inevitable that they are challenged and that they must seek to give some justification for their utterance. That is, revelation...is profoundly unwelcome, for it invades a life well-ordered without serious reference to Yahweh (1997: 628; cf. 630-1).⁶

Because of this the prophets were subjected to much suffering and an uncertain fate. As von Rad writes: “Not only the prophet’s lips but also his whole being were absorbed in the service of prophecy. Consequently, when the prophet’s life entered the vale of deep suffering and abandonment by God, this became a unique kind of witness-bearing” (1965: 36). Some of the prophets (such as Amos) encountered banishment and possibly even death (Brueggemann 1997: 632). The contested nature of biblical prophecy is irreducible, simply because the prophets’ message claims to be revelation of Yahweh, and it does so as critique of the current sinful situation in Israelite society.

In these features of Hebrew prophecy it is possible to glimpse a basic prophetic pattern, which certainly runs through the book of Amos. The denunciation of *sin* leads to the threat of *judgment*. This threat itself presupposes the possibility of *repentance* as a response to the proclamation of judgment. Finally, this repentance is possible only if grounded by *hope* in Yahweh’s continuing provision. While this paper will later discuss more specifically how theology is to be “prophetic,” *the field of theology must enter into this pattern, if its task is to ensure that what the church proclaims is indeed the*

⁶This difficulty is the reason why Horst Dietrich Preuss states that only in retrospect is it possible to differentiate accurately between the “true” prophets and the “false” ones (Preuss 1996: 86).

pattern, if its task is to ensure that what the church proclaims is indeed the gospel revealed in Christ. As the church preaches the gospel of the crucified and risen Christ, and as theologians reflect upon that proclamation and attempt to critique and clarify it,⁷ they enter into the sphere of the *true* prophet. This presents the difficult but necessary work of clarifying this discussion of prophecy christologically.

A venerable tradition in Protestantism (the *munus triplex*) has attempted to interpret Christ according to, and as the fulfillment of, the three Old Testament “offices” that usually required anointment. While that tradition has received its due criticism for imposing preconceived Hebrew notions upon Jesus without fully warranting that imposition textually (see Pannenberg 1968: 212-24), it remains the case that seeing Jesus as a prophet has textual warrant and is a helpful tool for interpreting the career of Jesus as it is accounted by the gospels. First, Matthew presents Jesus as preserving and deepening the message of the law and the prophets (see Mt. 5:17-18, 7:12, 22:40). Jesus fulfils rather than abrogates the law. Just as the Old Testament prophets called the nation and the people back to faithful adherence to the demands of the covenant, so also Jesus calls for a decision from his hearers, and presents a new interpretation of the law (as in the Sermon on the Mount). Part and parcel of Jesus’ proclamation was his critique of sin, his denunciation of injustice, and his clarion call to true worship over and against hypocrisy. Furthermore, just as the prophetic task dominated the entire *persons* of the Old Testament prophet, so also Jesus’ message is inseparable from his own person. His message carries him to his own death. Yet the crucial difference between Jesus and the Hebrew prophets, the difference that reveals Jesus precisely as the *true* prophet, is the fact that both Jesus’ *person*, that is Jesus himself, and Jesus’ *work* of establishing the kingdom of God through his death and resurrection, became the content of the gospel message. This is because, in contrast to the regular prophets who were bearers of revelation of Yahweh, Jesus was revelation in the flesh. He was, as the christological tradition has always insisted, the very being of God become human. Thus the preaching of this Jesus—his condemnation of sin, and call to repent and follow him on the basis of the hope provided by his death and resurrection—takes us squarely into the prophetic pattern. Inasmuch as theologians reflect upon that gospel, they inevitably come to do prophetic theology.

⁷ My construal of the task of theology here owes much to Karl Barth’s definition of the task of dogmatics as “criticising and revising [the church’s] speech about God” (Barth 1975:3).

LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND MARTYROLOGY

In recent theology it is Latin American liberation theology that has reflected most rigorously on the theological significance of contemporary martyrdom. This is not surprising, given the particular social and political situation out of which liberation theology arises, as well as the particular themes that are emblematic of liberation theology.

Several aspects of liberation theology have led it to be a self-consciously prophetic theology. These are: 1) the liberation theologians' view of salvation as something that encompasses all of reality, 2) its understanding of theology as "critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word..." (Gutiérrez 1988:11) in which Christian doctrine and Christian action are inseparable, and 3) its demand for a preferential option for the poor. Its theologians are called to be prophetic theologians in a manner similar (in an analogical, not univocal way) to the kind of prophetic voice given by the Hebrew prophets, with their denunciations of the injustices of society, their warnings of the impending judgment of God, their exhortations toward a better way (often pointing back to the law previously given them), their attempts to awaken eschatological hope in God's coming kingdom, and, finally, their suffering at the hands of those threatened by their message. It is this way of doing theology that has led the liberation theologians to the reality of martyrdom.

Jon Sobrino, the Salvadoran Jesuit, has presented the most detailed and sustained analysis of the theological significance of martyrdom in Latin America. This is because his adopted homeland and place of work for the past 47 years, El Salvador, has seen more than its fair share of martyrs of solidarity (see Peterson 1997). Through his reflection on the experience of the church in El Salvador, Sobrino has come to believe that liberation cannot be understood apart from martyrdom:

It is not a matter of abandoning liberation in favor of martyrdom, nor yet of simply juxtaposing them. It is rather about complementarity and mutual clarification, because liberation is weakened if it is separated from the reality of martyrdom, and the reverse is also true. More concretely—and as a matter of principle—martyrdom has to be understood in its essential relation to liberation, both as the negative consequence of a liberation praxis, and because it endows that praxis with the positive power of light and energy. (2003:103)

If the liberation theologians are interested in truly giving themselves up for liberation, according to Sobrino, then they must be prepared to accept the possibility of martyrdom, and must be prepared to understand what that possibility of martyrdom *means* for their theological task.

Sobrino insists that although it is understandable to focus one's attention on active martyrs, a full accounting of martyrdom in El Salvador requires consideration of the "crucified people." The term "crucified people," coined by Ignacio Ellacuría, refers to a kind of passive martyr, "the nameless, massacred dead, eliminated in order to terrorize the survivors" (Sobrino 2003:102). The crucified people are the masses of poor people who are killed, almost as by-products of society's greed and injustice. "These do not actively give up their lives in defense of the faith, not even to defend the kingdom in any direct sense. They are seen as 'nuisances,' and must be eliminated to facilitate the elimination of those who work more explicitly for justice" (2003:132). They are called the "crucified people" because they are killed by the same forces of sin that brought Jesus to his cross. Furthermore, they are a crucial present horizon from which we can today understand the cross. They help us to understand the cross and are themselves only understandable in light of the cross (see Ellacuría 1993:581-4).

Sobrino calls the active martyrs the "Jesuanic" martyrs because their path to death is analogous to the path taken by Jesus to his death on the cross. "Martyrs are those who follow Jesus in the things that matter, live in dedication to the cause of Jesus, and die for the same reasons that Jesus died. They are the 'Jesuanic' martyrs" (Sobrino 2003:122). These martyrs are killed because they served the crucified people in a radical way, attempting to take them down from their cross, a historical cross imposed by social, political, and economic forces (Sobrino 1994:53). Sobrino interprets these forces and structures as the "idols of death": "Idols are existing historical realities; they offer (apparent) salvation, they demand worship and orthodoxy, but in reality they dehumanize those who worship them—and what is worse, they need human victims in order to survive" (2003:114). The Jesuanic martyrs are those who, like Jesus, bore witness to the God of life in word and deed, over and against the forces of death (see Sobrino 1993:180-92). The main way these martyrs did this was by telling the truth about reality (Sobrino 1990b:25-9; 2003:104-6, 140-1, 188-9). If reality includes countless crucified people (including at least 75,000 killed or "disappeared" in the course of El Salvador's civil war), then theologians must tell the truth about that reality, search out its causes, and ask what the gospel says about that reality—that it is unjust, a

scandal, and absolutely intolerable. This hearkens back to the prophets' task of exposing injustice, proclaiming God's intolerance of it, and calling Israel to repentance. In persecution for their prophetic stance, the Jesuanic martyrs are killed because they unmasked the idols of death and told the truth about the oppressive nature of reality, thus calling the establishment into question.

This is Sobrino's account of *why* many have been martyred for solidarity in Latin America. But his theology of martyrdom takes a further step. How should these martyrs affect the doing of theology? How can they help theology itself to be prophetic? Of the various answers Sobrino gives, the one we shall focus on here is that the martyrs aid our understanding of theology's christological core. The fundamental similarity, or structural analogy, between the lives and deaths of the martyrs and the life and death of Jesus helps theology to better understand Jesus himself: his ministry, passion and death. In this regard, Sobrino describes a complex hermeneutical circle between the present realities of liberation and martyrdom, and the realities of kingdom and cross in the New Testament witness (2003: 6, 104, 107, 129). The martyrs in their work for liberation are essential for understanding the cross of Jesus in his salvific inauguration of the kingdom of God. The converse is also true, even methodologically prior, for the martyrs' service of liberation is unintelligible apart from the cross and resurrection of Jesus and his proclamation of the kingdom (2003:107-110). Here there is a more or less classical hermeneutical circle, in which the past and present horizons mutually illumine one another, and a fusion of horizons must occur if any adequate and existentially significant understanding is to take place.

But the hermeneutical situation is even more complicated for Sobrino, as each of the horizons itself is also a hermeneutical circle of a sort. The present experience of martyrdom cannot be grasped apart from the present work and hope for liberation. Similarly, the death of Jesus on the cross cannot be understood apart from Jesus' proclamation of and work for the kingdom of God. Furthermore, if one were to factor in the resurrection of Jesus, the analogous "rising" of the martyrs in the people whom they give hope (2003:149-154; 176-78), and the crucified peoples, then the interpretive situation becomes even more thorny. But Sobrino's point is a positive one: the martyrs' hermeneutical function, though perhaps theoretically complex, is that of shedding light, of making further understanding possible (2003:127). Apart from our reflection on the martyrs of solidarity, our under-

standing of the salvation brought by the cross and resurrection of Jesus is impoverished.

At this point, Sobrino's theoretical examination of martyrdom can be made more concrete by a brief examination of his analysis of some specific Salvadoran martyrs from the recent past, though, of course, these martyrdoms themselves are logically and experientially prior to Sobrino's martyrology. Indeed, there would be a sense of emptiness if we remained with Sobrino's theory of martyrs and ignored the martyrs themselves. The first and perhaps most prominent is Archbishop Oscar Romero. When Romero was elected archbishop he was a conservative, ultra-ecclesiastical, albeit honorable bishop (2003:12; 18). Shortly thereafter, however, when Romero stood over the body of the murdered priest Rutilio Grande in 1977 (a priest whom Romero had respected, but with whose methods and goals of pastoral work he had disagreed), Romero came to a realization. He realized that if he were to guide the Salvadoran flock, it would have to be in the manner of a priest like Grande: as an archbishop for whom the poor and their plight was the most important of all realities under God (2003:17). Sobrino writes: "I believe that Archbishop Romero, at the age of fifty-nine, not only underwent a conversion, but had a new experience of God. Never again would he be capable of separating God from the poor, or his faith in God from his defense of the poor. I believe he saw in God the prototype of his own option for the poor, and that that prototype demanded he put his option into practice" (2003:21).⁸

That "conversion" in Romero's life, attitude, and view of his vocation entailed that he practice an unqualified solidarity with the poor. Sobrino writes: "Archbishop Romero's love for his people caused him to relativize all else beside" (2003: 29). This meant that Romero found himself compelled to adopt a "comprehensive view of reality," something typical of the prophetic mind, that focused on the poor and God's partiality toward them (1990a:104-109; cf. Eichrodt 1961:353, 364, 381ff). Such a view of reality included noticing the disparity between rich and poor, and the destructive dynamics of a society that prevented the poor from extricating themselves from their plight. Since Romero's view of reality included such elements, his prophetic vocation as archbishop included vociferous *denunciation* of the established powers, structures, and authorities, which benefited from the unjust situation of

⁸ Sobrino recognizes that Romero might not have been entirely happy with the language of conversion (2003:15-16).

society and therefore violently resisted change. Romero's final homily in the cathedral in San Salvador included an especially strong condemnation of the government and military authorities (see Raj 1997:198). In this fateful homily Romero said: "In the name of God, then, and in the name of this suffering people, whose screams and cries mount to heaven, and daily grow louder, I beg you, I entreat you, I order you in the name of God: Stop the repression!" (Romero 1982:31-32). One day later, March 24, 1980, little over three years after the murder of Father Rutilio Grande, Archbishop Romero's denunciations and telling of the truth about reality had become such a threat to the establishment, such an inspiration to the masses of poor people, that he was shot at the altar.

On November 16, 1989, six Jesuits from the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas in San Salvador, along with their cook, Elba Ramos, and her daughter, Celina Ramos, were murdered in their house in the night. Ignacio Ellacuría, Segundo Montes, Ignacio Martín Baró, Amando López, Juan Ramón Moreno, and Joaquin López y López were the six priests with whom Sobrino shared the Jesuit residence at the university. Sobrino, who was in Thailand at the time, writes: "...the six murdered Jesuits were my community, they were really my family. We had lived, worked, suffered, and enjoyed ourselves together for many years. Now they were dead" (1990b:6). Along with Archbishop Romero, it is undoubtedly this community of martyrs which has been most significant in prompting Sobrino's incorporation of martyrdom into the theology of liberation.

One of the first things Sobrino says about his Jesuit brothers and their lives was that they lived as authentic human beings. "Before all else, they were human beings, Salvadorans, who tried to live honorably and responsibly amid the tragedy and hope of El Salvador" (1990b:10). This is a crucial point because, due to their privileged position as (for five of the six) native-born Spaniards and scholars, they could easily have avoided being wholly rooted in the *Salvadoran* reality. They lived in a humanizing way in an inhumane situation, opting to do their academic work in a "spirit of service" to the poor (1990b:11-13; 15-21). Behind their academic work of theological, sociological, and historical analysis, according to Sobrino, "...lay the real language of love for the Salvadoran people, the language of pity" (1990b:13). Electing this approach in their academic work foreclosed the possibility of living the calm and advantaged life of the "ivory-tower" scholar. They received threats on a regular basis, and were the victims of frequent attacks on their residence

and other areas of the university of which they were an integral part (1990b:14-15).

Sobrino ties this way of life closely to their deaths. In fact, their death by machine guns in the middle of the night, some dragged onto the lawn outside of their residence and some gunned down in their beds, cannot be understood apart from seeing how radical and politically subversive this way of life is. In Sobrino's assessment, what led to the death of the Jesuit martyrs was the fact that they "interfered with the idols [of death] *by telling the truth about the situation*, analyzing its causes, and proposing better solutions," such as dialogue rather than continuing war as the solution to the nation's conflict (1990b:25). It was sin, attempting to cover itself up, that led to their death, because their truth-telling was a form of unmasking.

Now, how are these martyrs related to the prophets and to Jesus? One way of putting it is that the kingdom of God was the point of orientation for all three: the Hebrew prophets, these martyrs of solidarity, and Jesus the true prophet. The prophets, in their critique of Israelite society and call to repentance, anticipate Jesus' definitive inauguration of the kingdom. The martyrs, on the other hand, in their option for the poor and their call to a nominally Christian society to live out its professed Christianity, point back to Jesus' establishment of the kingdom, requiring that people today live in accordance with the character of the kingdom. And it is Jesus Christ, as true prophet and archetypal martyr, the one who ushered in the kingdom of God in person, who gives ultimate meaning to the prophets and the martyrs. All three bring God's will into a sinful situation. Each illustrates in its own way the prophetic pattern: sin—judgment—repentance—hope. As such, all three participate in God's revelation, but each in different ways. The prophets were specially chosen vehicles of Yahweh's message to Israel. Jesus was God's very self, present in person. The martyrs, on the other hand, are not revelatory in the same way. They witness to the truth of Christ, to the will of God, as already revealed. They make God's will present by participating in the reality of Christ to which they bear witness.

In their prophetic role, in which they point to Christ, these martyrs exemplify the solidarity to which the church is called. As the church practices this kind of solidarity with the kingdom of God, it becomes the prophetic church (Limón 1993:714). But what is the relevance of this for theology? Why must theology even have such a prophetic dimension? Cannot theology rise above the fray and thus avoid the dangers of taking a prophetic and contested stance — and possibly lapsing into error? Truly *Christian* theology

has no such option. As the liberation theologians and other theologians, such as Barth and Brunner, have convincingly shown, theology is done for the sake of the church. If this kind of solidarity is the call of the church, and if theology is to be a servant and constructive critic of the church, then theology must follow this path of solidarity if it is to be a truly Christian theology. If the church is called to be prophetic — and therefore involved in the harshness of reality — then theology must reflect critically on that reality. If theology is for the church and the church is for the world, then theology must engage the world so as to serve the church. This brings the theologian into the prophetic sphere of martyrdom—both by reflecting on martyrdom as it relates to the church's witness in the public realm — and by accepting the risk of martyrdom involved in undertaking this prophetic task conscientiously. Theology done in this key must embody the seven aspects that Sobrino outlines regarding the prophetic dimension of Romero's witness (1990a:145-152). It must reflect the *ultimacy* of the truth of God, the *sovereignty* of that truth and its claim on all reality. It must refer to the very *history* in which people live. It must be *partisan* on behalf of those oppressed and repressed masses. For that reason, it must present a *novel* word in the midst of that history which will necessarily also be, to some degree, a *conflictive* word. Finally, due to the partisan, novel, and conflictive dimensions, a truly prophetic theology that has truly integrated the possibility of martyrdom into its work will be *fragile*, *defenseless*, and *contradicted* by the powers and conventional wisdom of the age.

THE HERMENEUTICS OF MARTYRDOM

The fragile, defenseless, and particularly the contradicted nature of prophetic witness as it relates to martyrdom leads to the problem of the *contested* nature of martyrdom that was previously raised regarding the Hebrew prophets. Who has the right and ability to interpret a martyr correctly? Does the life (and thus also the death) of a martyr speak for itself? Who decides who is a martyr and who is not? The early church encountered this problem with the martyrdom of confession, as the enthusiasm to die for Christ the special death of the martyr often led people to such recklessness with their lives that it was increasingly difficult to differentiate between suicide and martyrdom (Straw 2002:42). Though many of the people mentioned in this paper (Bonhoeffer, King, Romero, the UCA Jesuits) may seem to qualify quite

clearly as martyrs, it remains the case that one person's martyr is another person's traitor. And it remains the case that even though the vast majority of observers understand these deaths to be *murders*, crimes without excuse, the perpetrators of these crimes undoubtedly felt "justified" to one degree or another in killing them because they saw the martyrs as traitors, rebels, and criminals. Bonhoeffer, King, Romero, and the Jesuits, each in different ways, were killed because their killers saw them as criminally subversive.⁹

This may seem like a petty point because these potential "justifications" in the minds of the killers certainly seem weak, fraudulent, and outright false to us. It seems *obvious* that the martyrs were right and their killers were murderers. That is probably the case, but it does not nullify the point that there is no "proof" for such an assessment. As with the prophets, the martyrs can offer no credentials. One can only look at their lives and attempt to analyze the relationship between the choices made in their lives and the way their lives ended. On that basis alone can a judgment be made regarding the authenticity of their martyrdom, and more importantly and difficultly, the *meaning* of that martyrdom. This is rendered difficult by the complexity of interpreting *anyone's* life. Lives, intentions, causes and effects, especially for figures involved in the conflictive dynamics of society, are inevitably opaque to some degree. And we must remember, as Sobrino points out with regard to Romero, that this opacity and uncertainty is inevitable and irremovable. It is part and parcel of the *prophetic* dimension of their lives that led to their deaths (1990a:151).

The contested character of the martyrs also needs to serve the critical function of preserving the martyrs' true legacy even from those who *affirm* the martyrs precisely as martyrs. The fact that we so quickly label them "martyrs" should give us pause, because it can too easily serve as an excuse for avoiding for ourselves the prophetic dynamics that led them to their deaths. It is certainly the case that the stories of Bonhoeffer, King, and Romero, for example, are put to many different uses. For example, a Lutheran friend of mine has explained to me how the witness of Bonhoeffer sometimes serves

⁹ This point is especially relevant in an age in which various forms of what most regard as terrorism are interpreted by some as martyrdoms. This reveals the conflictive and ever-contested nature of religious truth claims in a pluralistic and globalized world. Attempting to address this question in detail would take this paper too far afield, but the issue is too relevant to escape notice here.

for some Lutherans as an excuse: “Whew, despite the massive failure of fidelity among Lutherans in Germany, there’s at least Bonhoeffer, and he makes up for it.” So the question must remain: how do these martyrdoms function for us? Do their deaths provide ways for us to avoid our own? Is this a form of their co-option by the same forces which they opposed in their lives and which caused their martyrdoms?

Related to this hermeneutical difficulty in a different way is the difficulty of saying *anything* about a martyr without cheapening her or his death, saying too easily in shoddy words what should remain mysterious, part of the mystery of a love that is self-sacrificial to the end. It is analogically related to the difficulty of saying anything before the event of the cross of Jesus (see Sobrino 1978:195-201). In some sense the reality of martyrdom must silence us, and must cause theology to think carefully before it speaks, lest it dishonor the witness of the martyr by too quickly explaining away the essential negativity of their deaths (Limón 1993:702).

Therefore theological reflection must be careful in what it says about the martyrs, because it can too easily and cheaply turn the scandal of the martyrdoms into light without the residue of darkness and too easily dull the prophetic edge of the martyrs’ witness. In so doing theology would forfeit its own prophetic character by cheapening the martyrdom and removing it from its prophetic, dialectical, and conflictive context.

Though these dangers are inherent in the hermeneutics of martyrdom for theology and, therefore, to some degree unavoidable, they also show the need for a critical interpretive principle that can make the hermeneutical difficulty workable. This critical principle is ever-present in Sobrino’s reflection on the Salvadoran martyrs, though I am emphasizing its priority more than Sobrino himself does. This critical principle is the biblical narrative’s testimony to the cross of Jesus. A martyrdom can only be interpreted by asking the question of how the life and death of the apparent martyr, in its own way, own context, and within that context’s particular set of problems, reproduces the dynamics that led to the martyrdom of Jesus, as well as the salvific character of that death. Though, as Sobrino insists, the contemporary martyrdoms do shed light on the cross of Christ, the interpretive priority must rest with the cross of Jesus. Otherwise the cross of Christ could easily become the subsequent justification for many types of “martyrs,” some of which may be less Christian than others. The crucial reason for bestowing methodological priority on Jesus’ cross is that it enables the contemporary martyrdoms to retain their proper character as witnesses

to *Christ* and God's salvific *liberation of the world through Christ*; and it is only as *witnesses*, not the thing itself, that martyrdoms retain their proper character. They are the secondary analogue, not the primary analogate.¹⁰ For when they are identified as the real thing, they lose their real power, which lies in the reality which they make present as witnesses and in which they participate—the life, cross, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Keeping the ordering straight here allows the martyrdoms to be interpreted correctly as *martyrdoms*, for “martyr” is derived from the Greek for “witness.” This is in keeping with the prophets’ task of always pointing to Yahweh. Only as we realize that the life of someone like Martin Luther King Jr. points *beyond* itself do we open up the space to interpret that life rightly and powerfully, and only as such does it participate in the reality which it helps to make present. This allows the witness of Jesus and the breaking-in of the kingdom of God to remain the crucial components of the martyrs’ witness, not their lives in themselves.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MARTYRDOM FOR THE PROPHETIC DIMENSION OF THEOLOGY

At this point it remains to tie the various threads of this paper together in order to show more succinctly some of the implications of martyrdom for the prophetic dimension of theology.

It is significant that all of the martyrs discussed in this paper were, to one degree another, theologians. Theirs was a prophetic brand of theology that led them to “enflesh” their theological theory in a certain kind of practice with significant repercussions in their societies. So the first lesson for a theology that purports to be prophetic is that it cannot abstract itself from the real problems and dynamics of a society. Theologians must adopt the preferential option for the “least of these,” in whom Jesus said he would be present (Mat. 25). What is clearly the driving force in their lives was a concrete and consistent option for the poor, inspired and energized “theocentrically” (Gutiérrez 1993:239-241). They took the side of the oppressed, which, in

¹⁰ At times Sobrino seems to transgress this rule by talking about the “salvation” brought by the martyrs. I think that this is best interpreted along the lines of my proposal, with their “salvation” being precisely Christ’s salvation, with them as analogical mediators or witnesses to that salvation. Another way to put it would be as a *participation* in the salvific martyrdom of Christ.

Franklyn Balasundaram's words, puts the persecutor to shame, causing the persecutor to lash out and destroy the martyr (1997:12). In Sobrino's language, taking the side of the oppressed means for theology that it must depict God according to the scriptures, as the God of life who always opposes the "idols of death" who enslave and oppress. This means that a prophetic theology, a theology that intends to express the most radical consequences of the history of Jesus, as well as the claim of that history on all of creation, must not disconnect ethics from theology, just as the Hebrew prophets never disconnected their critique of injustice from their proclamation of the majesty of Yahweh. Without the ethical dimension it will not be true theology, and certainly not prophetic theology (Limón 1993:705).

In situations of extreme violence and repression, such theological engagement with society may lead to martyrdom. Moreover, in situations of such violence, martyrdom may even be an *inevitable* result of true solidarity. Romero emphasized this point when he preached the following: "Brothers and sisters, I am glad that the Church is persecuted, precisely because it has taken a preferential option for the poor, and has tried to incarnate itself in the interests of the poor ... It would be sad if, in a country where people are being so horribly murdered, there were not also priests among the victims. They are witness to a Church incarnated in the problems of the people" (cited in Sobrino 2003:142). The martyrs reveal the great and potential cost of this. They also reveal the great power and Christian authenticity in doing so.

Bringing theology into the real problems of society leads to a second implication, that of realizing that prophetic theology will always be conflictive. It will never be able to please everyone. When it intends to do so, it forfeits its prophetic character. It must always make an option, always a contested option. These theological martyrs were killed precisely because their theology thrust them into the fray, into the conflicts of society. Sobrino characterizes this as a cross of bearing the weight of reality—which is a reality dominated by what he calls the anti-kingdom (2003:146-7). Thus the primary and most seductive temptation of the church, and of its theology, is to avoid conflict (2003:147-149; see also 1990a:150). It is only from the conflicts of history that produce crosses, or it is only *in spite of evil*, that hope arises, just as the resurrection is subsequent to the cross and only intelligible in the light of it. As Limón points out, the reality that causes martyrdom can be called nothing if not sin (1993:709). Thus from martyrdom theology learns that its prophetic dimension, after the pattern of the Hebrew prophets, can only be maintained as it takes seriously the reality of sin.

A third implication of martyrdom for theology's prophetic task today is that theology must see itself as *service* of the church, the Christian faith, and the world. Inasmuch as it serves these realities, it serves the ultimate reality which is present in the others—the kingdom of God and the God of the kingdom. This is analogous to the prophets' service of Yahweh and Israel through their vocation. Once again Limón is instructive as he shows that such theology is service because it encourages historical liberation by allowing people to feel God's nearness as love. "It is a service to the church and the faith, because it criticizes them and shows them the liberating and redeeming way to follow the Crucified. The martyrs show us how we can become incarnate in history and society without becoming worldly" (1993:715). So theology will serve the world as it theologizes for the poor. And if Sobrino is right that the poor are the reality through which Jesus Christ challenges the church, such theology will serve the church as well, as it enables it to be what God intends it to be (2003:137). The martyrs show theology what is at stake in such service, what must be lost, and what must be given.

Finally, by remaining authentically *Christian* in this way, theology is enabled to employ the testimony of the lives and deaths of the martyrs as a hermeneutical lens that enables further understanding of the world and of the Christian faith. "A murder is darkness, but *sub specie contrarii* it throws light on many things. A martyrdom has its own strong light, which says more than a thousand words about life and faith" (Sobrino 1990b:21). Sobrino perhaps says this best in his reflection on the four American women—Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel, and Jean Donovan—who had cast their lot with the Salvadoran people and were raped and murdered in El Salvador on December 20, 1980: "Christ lies dead here among us. He is Maura, Ita, Dorothy, and Jean. But he is risen, too, in these same four women, and he keeps the hope of liberation alive. The world is moved, and indignant, and so are we Christians. But to us Christians, this murder tells us something about God as well" (Sobrino 1988:156). As Sobrino puts it elsewhere: "... the martyrs (as persons and as peoples) not only *take us back* to theological concepts of God and Christ, but above all they *make them present*. In this way the martyrs become a source of theological knowledge" (2003:127). The martyrs, by remaining true to the gospel, to the option for the poor, cast the sin of the world into stark relief; they also give us eyes to understand the cross and resurrection of Christ, by which God has defeated that sin. The witness that is shown by the martyrs' *deaths*, and particularly the unwillingness to compromise on the option for the poor that characterized their *lives*, is what allows their

deaths (and lives) to be enduring vehicles of hope. This is why Romero, perhaps all too cognizant of what awaited him, claimed that “[i]f they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people” (cited in Sobrino 2003:113). This means that as the martyrs participate in the reality which they make present—the cross and resurrection of Christ—they are a source, a quasi-sacramental source, of theology’s access to those realities. Speaking of theology precisely as *logos* about *Theos*, that is, as *discourse* about God and God’s relationship with creation in Christ, this is probably the most important implication of martyrdom for theology.

In conclusion, we have seen how these martyrdoms are dependent for their meaning on their analogy to the cross of Christ. They are *witness*, a witness that theology cannot avoid if it is to be a truly prophetic theology. By way of conclusion and by way of a further removed analogy, it is necessary, especially in our North American first world society, where authentic martyrdoms of solidarity are harder to come by (since the idols of death here are more circumspect in their destruction), to consider an analogous sense of *living* martyrdom. By “living martyrdom” I mean that theologians who intend to do truly prophetic theology must be prepared to accept the cost of their preferential option, even if there is little chance of the cost being death. Theologians must prophetically be willing to bear the cost of their option, of their denunciations of both the right and left (each in different ways) in service of the God of *life*. True prophetic theology must be willing to accept whatever consequences may follow from testifying to the gospel by calling the church and society to be what they *ought to be*. This kind of living martyrdom, finally, will be most possible for theology as it keeps in mind the legacy of the dead martyrs, those who have given their lives for their commitment to Christ and his kingdom, either by confession or by solidarity.

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