

Response to the Respondents

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Now I have the difficult task of responding to five thoughtful responses to my paper—in just a few minutes. Obviously, to do so adequately would be impossible. But I do want to tell the five respondents how grateful I am for their reflections, and how much I appreciate the thought they have given to my proposal, the seriousness with which they have taken it, and the helpful ways in which their responses further the discussion. I will now attempt to respond in a modest way to each of them. Lisa Powell brings some worthy critical concerns to my paper. She thinks that my distinction between the martyrdom of “confession” and the martyrdom of “solidarity” is a flawed distinction that serves to cover up the fact that I am not considering the early martyrs conscientiously enough. Powell is undoubtedly right in some of her contentions. Part of my response to her here is, quite simply, to pass the buck a little bit. My work in tonight’s paper is heavily, perhaps too heavily, dependent on Sobrino’s theology of martyrdom, which focuses on the contemporary martyrs. Furthermore, the distinction between hatred of the faith and hatred of justice is rather common in Catholic liberationist discussions of martyrdom. But since passing the buck gets you only so far, I need to say more.

Powell desires to see more continuity between present and past martyrs. She thinks that my focus on the element of “confession” is too narrow and simplistic because it ends up portraying the early martyrdoms as simply a matter of *verbal* confession. Further, she wonders whether I might not be misusing the Roman Catholic definition of martyrdom by not interpreting its language of “witness” as multidimensionally as she would prefer. On this point I want to say only that the context of the passage I quote in the Catholic Catechism supports an interpretation that focuses on the element of con-

fession and doctrine, although Powell is right that “witness” in itself need not necessarily be taken so narrowly. But I agree with Powell that a hard and fast distinction between these kinds of martyrdoms is impossible. While I agree with Powell that a more comprehensive examination of early church martyrs could only help to improve my argument, I did try in the paper to show the essential unity of the two “kinds” of martyrdom, precisely in a more comprehensive sense of “confession.” The distinction is made for heuristic purposes and as matter of emphasis rather than out of a desire to ossify the examples into two types. The distinction comes from the fact that in the popular Christian mind, I think, martyrdom is often associated with a rather narrow sense of “confession.” To the extent that is indeed the case, “confession” needs to be seen more broadly, and my distinction, despite its potential pitfalls, attempts to *enrich* the classical definition of martyrdom by pointing out the special relevance of the element of solidarity today. In this regard it is notable that despite the compelling case for greater past-present continuity in martyrdom that Powell makes through her survey of early martyr-accounts, the notion of solidarity is not prominent. That seems to me to support the need for the distinction I made, if one bears in mind that it is a distinction rather than a separation.

Powell’s focus on the notion of *imitatio Christi* as the central motif for early Christian martyrdom is certainly commensurate with the basic impulse of Sobrino’s martyrology. Particularly interesting is the point she makes regarding the connection between atonement theories and portrayals of the martyrs. In the early church the salvific effects of Christ’s death were sometimes attributed to the deaths of the martyrs. Sobrino’s anti-Anselmian atonement theology, which approximates the so-called “moral influence” theory as much as anything else, functions the same way for him. Jesus shows the possibility of a life of love, which then becomes possible for others who follow him. That is why Sobrino can talk of the “salvation” brought by the Jesuanic martyrs, even though, as I stated in my paper, I am not sure that such an approach respects the christological priority he always intends. And that is precisely where my worry comes in and the reason why I try to push Sobrino in the direction I do. Maybe I am too much of a Protestant, but my main conviction is that salvation is something that comes from *Christ*, not from ourselves. That is the reason why I attempt to “sacramentalize” the language of “witness” to describe what the martyrs do. Powell portrays my position as a “simple” pointing to Christ, and states that I think the martyrs only give us “eyes to understand” rather than what she calls “authentic glimpses.”

In response, I think that having eyes to understand is consistent with Powell's language of "manifestation" or an "authentic glimpse," *if* what we are talking about is the salvation brought by Christ in the event of his death and resurrection, *and* the means by which this understanding comes about is the very *persons* of the martyrs. Apart from "witness," which I am trying to interpret sacramentally as a kind of participation in which the "sign" by its witness makes present the "signified," I have a hard time understanding what else the martyrs might bring. This sense of "witness" in my view is the *correct* manifestation of the gospel as we should expect it. It is the gospel preached with one's own life, not a replacement of that gospel with one's own life. The "salvation" brought by the martyrs in the sense of the social change their witness furthers is in my view part of the overarching salvific kingdom that Jesus has decisively inaugurated, which in Sobrino's terms comes wholly in grace and on that basis calls for participatory human activity. The martyrs *become* Christ as they witness to him. The way they point us to him is precisely their participation in his reality, a participation which gives us an authentic glimpse of Christ.

Santiago Slabodsky's response points out some interesting convergences between my discussion of martyrdom and certain Jewish understandings. I am happy that he thinks that the kind of theology of martyrdom that emerges out of Christian liberation theology is also relevant to what he calls the post-1945 development of "Constantinian Judaism," especially in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He makes explicit a point that was often implicit in the distinction between martyrdoms of confession and solidarity. This point is that if we enrich traditional understandings of martyrdom by emphasizing the importance of solidarity as the primary cause for which people are martyred in our world today, it becomes clear that true martyrdom (at least in the Christian sense) is a matter of defending the *other* (either as individual or community) rather than defending one's self. That Slabodsky finds this implication for Jews from my unabashedly christological proposal is significant. But given the other things he says, largely from Daniel Boyarin, this is perhaps to be expected, if indeed Jewish and Christian conceptions of martyrdom were forged through a sometimes violent "conversation" between the sibling traditions, in the first centuries of Christianity and again in the horrors of the 20th century. Although I would not want to say that Bonhoeffer was the first martyr of "solidarity," he is one who quickly comes to mind as showing such solidarity with Jewish victims. This convergence is also explained by what Slabodsky tells us about pre-Holocaust Jewish con-

ceptions of martyrdom, which had a significant, albeit limited, place for the notion of solidarity, even if accepting death was problematic. Slabodsky's point regarding Jewish notions of martyrdom as focusing on accepting the *risk* of death rather than simply *death itself* is also significant. That point shows the divergence brought by the centrality of christology in Christian theology, to state the matter simply. A death that results from a life of love lived for the other is seen as *ultimately* "good" in Christian theology primarily because of the way it witnesses to the death of Christ and therefore awakens hope through its connection with his resurrection. Be that as it may (and I see no reason to downplay the point), I think that Slabodsky takes the right approach here, using this topic as a means for finding a way for Jews and Christians to remain united together in the struggle for justice, despite some enduring disagreements.

Debra Duke brings to our discussion the connection between the question of martyrdom and its positive and negative possibilities with respect to victims of domestic violence. She rightly points to Ellacuría's category of the "crucified people" as the category that best describes victims of such violence. They certainly cannot be considered martyrs of solidarity for, as Duke points out, they feel no solidarity with anyone. Furthermore, their fate comes to them for the most part passively, rather than actively (though perhaps that distinction is too neat in this case). Duke argues that the martyrdoms of domestic abuse are "prophetic" because they point us to an ugly reality in our society that we too easily ignore. And a certain type of "faith" plays a role, for it keeps them in the relationships that eventually destroy them. Furthermore, even though such faith is not, properly speaking, *Christian* faith, the ideological use of Christian themes to justify such a flawed and dangerous belief amongst victims of domestic violence is too important for us to ignore.

Duke shows an interesting parallel between what I have called the "prophetic pattern" and what she calls the "abuse cycle." I do not take her point to be to attempt to disqualify the validity of the prophetic pattern, but to show that the affinity between the two patterns is significant enough that the danger of distortion is very real. Duke also cautions against unqualified appeal to the analogy of the martyrs with the death and resurrection of Jesus, because that analogy has been used as a justification for women to stay in situations of abuse. Nothing salvific comes from their "crosses," just as nothing salvific comes from the deaths of the crucified people. The only "salvific" thing that Duke thinks can come from the victims of abuse is the response that *we* make to their lives in attempting to prevent further cases of abuse. What

Duke indicates is the sometimes slippery distinction between: 1) voluntary suffering that is in some sense redemptive (and therefore part of a healthy and faithful Christian ethic), and 2) suffering which is not redemptive but only *seems* to be — and therefore ought to be resisted by the Christian rather than justified by appeal to the *imitatio Christi*.

This is indeed a difficult problem. Not even an appeal to the fact that Jesus' suffering was voluntarily for the *other* solves the problem, for many women stay in destructive situations for the sake of their spouse or their children. The important thing is that one who puts oneself in a situation of suffering in the hope that it will contribute to some kind of "redemption" should do so with the active attempt to *change* the situation. Just as Ellacuria and Sobrino point out in their descriptions of the "crucified people," situations of domestic violence are simply evil and scandalous. Appeal to martyrdom must not be used to keep such victims trapped in their suffering. The real challenge is to those of us who might help them: those, like the Jesuits and Romero, who have the power to *enter into* the suffering of such people in solidarity with them, with the purpose of changing their situation.

Pushpa Iyer's response comes from the perspective of conflict analysis and resolution theory. She worries that the overarchingly theological analysis I give of martyrdom, one that comes only from the viewpoint of Christian faith, may unwittingly have the effect of contributing negatively to the religious dimension of "intractable conflicts" in our world today. Her response seizes upon a problem to which I was only able to devote a short and undoubtedly insufficient footnote, namely, that martyrdom is an issue fraught with difficulties in a world where warring religious truth claims are wedded to horrific violence. This is an important problem that I do not want to minimize, but I am skeptical whether Iyer's suggestion of finding some inter-religious way of "bestowing the mantle of martyrdom" is a realistic solution. I am certainly not against inter-religious dialogue of various sorts, but I am not confident about the prospects of any form of such dialogue that requires the setting aside of the particulars of the participants' own religious commitment, which is what her proposal seems to indicate as the only way forward. Such an approach would seem to appeal to some generic category of "religion" which would then be the basis for any discussion about who qualifies for martyrdom. In a sense it almost appears as if she is suggesting a non-religious understanding of martyrdom.

But, returning to the root of the term, if a martyr is a "witness" of some kind, then a witness to what? For a Christian such as myself, the answer can

be nothing other than the death of Jesus Christ. That is not meant as an exclusionary tactic which hegemonically scoffs at all martyrdom claims from other traditions, but simply as a description of the reality of the matter for Christians. Christians are those who follow Jesus Christ in faith and practice. In my view there can be no responsible discussion of martyrdom for a Christian apart from that focus. That is not to say that Christians cannot participate with persons of other religions in discussions about political problems and potential solutions, including tactics that put one's life in jeopardy. But in that case Christians will not be talking about *martyrdoms*, at least not in the most proper sense of the term from the Christian point of view, but about radically-devoted political activists.

This leads to the first of Iyer's two problems with my paper. She considers it a shortcoming that other kinds of "martyrs" are not visible in the theological lens I have set up. On the one hand I largely agree with her; I simply wonder how it could be otherwise without it ceasing to be a Christian conception of martyrdom. But on the other hand, it may be the case that Christians could recognize in the "strategic" and "activist" martyrs a further removed sense of martyrdom on the basis of Christ as critical norm for the analogical understanding of non-Christian martyrs. Take someone like Gandhi: Were many of his actions "Christ-like"? Did he act as he did out of genuine love for oppressed persons? Were many of his actions ones that Christians should themselves perform in similar situations? The answer to these questions would have to be "yes." Did the course of Gandhi's life and death follow analogically the course of Jesus' life and death? The answer to that would have to be a "yes and no." Did Gandhi do this out of commitment to Christ? The answer is "no." There is enough here that some Christians might regard Gandhi as a kind of martyr, simply because he died in the course of a worthy struggle, and that is perhaps an indication of how the term "martyr" is thrown around indiscriminately even within the Christian church. But in the most proper Christian sense of the term, Gandhi would obviously not be regarded as a martyr. It is only in a further removed, analogous sense that Gandhi could be considered a martyr.

Once again, in strictly Christian terms, I would want to reserve the most proper sense of martyrdom, without necessarily restricting the analogical and common-language uses of the term, for a death that comes out of a certain kind of life—a life of following Jesus. Iyer is rightly concerned about uses of religion and the concept of "martyrdom" to support dubious political strategies and ends, including those in which the "martyr's" death

includes the deaths of many others whom most of us regard as innocent. My insistence on the christological critical norm as the way for Christian theology to navigate the hermeneutics of martyrdom seems to me to be the only way within Christianity, although far from foolproof, to address this problem

In fact, to dispute Iyer's claim that suicide bombers reproduce most of the aspects of Christ on the cross, the Christian appeal to the cross is precisely the reason why a phenomenon like suicide bombing *cannot* be seen as "martyrdom" from a Christian point of view, even apart from the issue of pacifism. True Christian martyrs of solidarity, like the UCA Jesuits, do not — as Christ did not — *seek* death. They support the poor and live out the prophetic will of God faithfully in a world of sin. It is that world of sin that brings them to their death. Martyrdom happens to them because of their Christian motives and morals, to be sure, but their deaths are more directly the result of their vocal political stances. The goal of the martyrs treated in this paper was to save lives on all sides, even to reclaim the humanity of the oppressors by prophetically calling them to cease their repression—which is itself a form of liberation. To speak of this kind of martyrdom in the same breath as the "martyrdom" of suicide bombers is simplistic and shows the danger of free-floating conceptions of martyrdom that are not governed by a critical norm, such as that which the cross of Christ provides for Christians. But, in general, Christians would have no reason to apply their criteria of martyrdom to the fallen political heroes of other religions, even if it would be an underlying Christian ethic that would guide Christians' evaluation of those heroes.

However, the Christian church would do well to ask in humility why we are able to point to so few Christian martyrs in the situations that have produced those praiseworthy heroes from other religions.

Finally, Rubén Rosario-Rodríguez brings several worthy concerns to our discussion. On his first point, that the distinction between solidarity and confession too easily bifurcates theology and ethics, I agree with his general concern. The martyrs discussed in my paper certainly entered into their acts of solidarity *because* of their confession of Christ. That is a point I tried to make in the paper, perhaps not clearly enough, by showing the essential unity of the two "kinds" of martyrdom. One of the implications I draw at the end of the paper is that the necessity for theologians to engage the real problems of society requires a close connection between theology and ethics. But as Rosario-Rodríguez points out, the converse is also true, Christian ethics is

not to be separated from the theology that informs it. So, certainly, ethical motifs such as “liberation” are *also* theological motifs whose origins are the scriptures and church tradition. I thank him for clarifying this aspect of our discussion.

In response to Rosario-Rodríguez’s second point, I think it is important that we try to remain fair to Sobrino and not overemphasize the sense in which he thinks the crucified peoples bear salvation. Sobrino repeatedly emphasizes the essential negativity of their deaths. Indeed, the point of liberation theology is to call for the *removal* of the crucified people from their historical cross. It is important that Sobrino realizes that these are *passive* martyrs, and that calling them martyrs at all in this sense implies a distinction from *active* martyrs. That being said, I share Rosario-Rodríguez’s concern that flippant talk regarding the crucified people can too easily give the impression that there is something *good* about their deaths.

This takes us into the third point, regarding the crucified people and theodicy. Rosario-Rodríguez is worried that Sobrino’s attempt to give meaning to the deaths of the crucified people ends up justifying their deaths by appeal to divine providence. I myself think that Sobrino’s account of the cross of Jesus provides a significant counter-argument to that interpretation. Sobrino does not think that Jesus’ death was something planned by God from the beginning. Rather, he talks about it as what is (perhaps) the inevitable end of an authentic incarnation. That is to say, if God really becomes present in our history and lives a life of true love amidst history’s sin and hatred, then death is an understandable, perhaps even inevitable, result. The sin of the world will attempt to destroy that love because the latter calls sin into question. The “goodness” of the cross is precisely the love of Jesus’ life, as well as the way in which God, almost *ex nihilo*, can (through the resurrection) transform the *essential* negativity of Jesus’ murder into salvation. Although I do not agree entirely with the direction of Sobrino’s atonement theology, his construal of it does shield him from the objection at hand. For in parallel terms it follows that anything “good” or “salvific” that Sobrino could possibly attribute to the deaths of the crucified people must necessarily be something that God does *despite* the essential negativity of those deaths. Although Sobrino does make statements on occasion that tend toward the dangers that worry Rosario-Rodríguez, and although I agree with him that moral agency is a necessary component of martyrdom in the most proper sense, I think Sobrino’s main point is to honor the crucified people by naming them

theologically and by making it impossible for theology to proceed as usual without taking their horrifying reality into account.