

## Lundberg's "The Martyrdom of Solidarity": Some Implications for Jewish-Christian Liberationist Dialogue

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In his essay, "The Blood of the Martyrs is the Seed of Life," Matthew Lundberg provocatively reformulates the definition of martyrdom in light of recent liberation theologies, current social struggles, and the retrieval of Christian approaches to martyrdom which were held before Christianity became Christendom. Consequentially, his proposal can be seen as a return to a non-imperial, perhaps even a counter-imperial, understanding of Christianity. I will focus my Jewish liberationist response on the opportunities that Lundberg's main focus offers for a revolutionary renewal of the current Jewish-Christian dialogue in particular, and the project of interfaith dialogue in general.

Lundberg's main suggestion is that the classic concept of "martyrdom as confession," (that is the understanding that martyrdom means death which results from resistance to negating "the truth") (2), should be replaced with a more contemporary understanding of "martyrdom as solidarity" (5), (that is, the understanding that martyrdom results from accepting "death in the course of ... [the] struggle for justice and the rights of the poor" (1). After presenting three methodological considerations, I will embark on the project alluded to in my first paragraph: I will attempt to explain how a post-1945 Christian-liberationist concept of martyrdom is the result of a dialogic conversation with its brother/sister tradition (Judaism), confronts the Jewish Constantinian project, collaborates with a Jewish liberationist struggle, and (perhaps the most important) can be a source for a radical renewal of Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Three considerations should be taken into account before we develop our analysis. First, I would like to suggest assertively that Lundberg's paper

can be read in two ways. The first way is to see it as a liberationist argument for replacing the notion of “martyrdom of confession” with the notion of “martyrdom of solidarity.” The second way to read his paper is to notice that he is, in fact, asserting the validity of both concepts. I will choose, strategically, the first option as the lens through which I will interpret this paper. But I will admit that, even when he is presenting his thesis, Lundberg is careful to explain the simultaneous possibility of both approaches to martyrdom, although his personal preference for the “martyrdom of solidarity” frame is clear when he reflects on liberationist praxis. (Honestly, I cannot blame him!)

The second consideration deals with Lundberg’s interest in maintaining a dialogue with systematic theologians and other thinkers of his own tradition, even though his own reflection is guided by what Juan Luis Segundo would call the hermeneutic circle, a hermeneutical process in which the first step is reflection upon praxis. Since many of the respondents other than myself will probably focus on the Christian theological debate, I will pay special attention to the link between the first two steps of the hermeneutic circle because I see this link as a starting point for agreement between Christian liberationism (theology as reflection upon praxis) and Jewish rabbinism (*halakah* Jewish law as reflection upon praxis).

The third and final consideration is that Lundberg’s theoretical reading emerges, especially, from three historical experiences: Christian Latin American martyrs (Jon Sobrino’s understanding of the deaths of the Salvadoran Jesuits priests and Archbishop Oscar Romero), Christianity under Nazi Germany (Dietrich Bonhoeffer), and Christian leaders in the American Civil Rights Movement (Martin Luther King Jr.). The parallel the historical experiences that I will reflect on are: (1) Jewish Latin American experiences of social struggle (Marshall T. Meyer and *Masorti*), (2) Judaism under Nazi Germany (the Holocaust), and (3) Jewish American thought linked with Civil Rights Movement (Abraham Joshua Heschel and a civil rights-inspired liberationist Jewish theologian, Marc H. Ellis).

Now that these three preliminary considerations have been stated, we can immerse ourselves in the opportunities for Jewish-Christian dialogue that emerge from Lundberg’s work. The most provocative consequence of Lundberg’s proposal is that it not only calls into question and critiques Christendom’s understanding of martyrdom through reflection on the praxis of social struggle, but it also calls into question the understanding of martyrdom current in post-Holocaust Judaism. After 1945, Judaism emerged as a

Constantinian tradition after adopting the very concept of power that enabled Christendom to oppress Jews during the last 1600 years (Ellis 1997:31-32). Jews in America and Israel have, paradoxically, through their empowerment, reversed roles from being the permanent "Other" of Christendom (Levinas 1961:271-3), to making Palestinians the permanent "Other" in Israel. One basis for thinking about the "martyrdom of solidarity" in liberationist terms that cross traditions (Maduro 1991:vi-viii), is the fact that Bonhoeffer, the first theologian who wrote about and practiced this type of martyrdom, was confronting the Jewish Holocaust.

In post-Holocaust thought, a paradox has emerged in Jewish-Christian relationships. On the one hand, one group (primarily Roman Catholic Liberationists) that belongs to the powerful side of the relationship (Christianity), has decided to engage with the needs of the oppressed, and, as a consequence, has forced a re-evaluation of the concept of martyrdom. On the other hand, another group (Constantinian Jews), which has suffered oppression, and belongs to the powerless side of the relationship (Judaism) has decided to embark on a self-empowerment project that has created new oppressions and has elevated to martyrdom people who are in fact oppressing other people. Hence, from a Jewish Liberationist perspective, Lundberg's proposal of "solidarity-liberationist" martyrdom can be seen not only as a source of confrontation for Constantinian Judaism, but as a natural ally of traditional (pre-1945) and Liberationist (post-1945) Judaism.

I would like to explore the above assertion by considering how Lundberg's proposal supports Liberationist Judaism and confronts Constantinian Judaism. Lundberg is, perhaps, one of the first Christians to recognize that liberation theology, at least in the way in which Sobrino deals with the concept of martyrdom, draws here not primarily upon the Exodus experience, which is the basis of so much of Christian liberation theology, but upon "the prophetic dimension." This move allows Lundberg, implicitly and perhaps without intention, to ask for a reformulation of the contemporary understanding of liberation theology. Coincidentally, the same proposal was made in 1987 by the first two Jewish thinkers to reflect upon the possibilities of a Jewish theology of liberation. Marc Ellis announced that liberation theology is the return to the "Jewish prophetic ethos," (Ellis 1987:120-123) while Dan Cohn-Sherbok presented Jewish "ortho-praxis" as the practice to which liberation theology is returning (Cohn-Sherbok 1987: 9-11).

This return to the "prophetic ethos" is foundational not only generally for the whole of what Brazilian-French Michael Lowy calls "Liberationist Chris-

tianity and Judaism”, but also specifically for the Jewish traditional concept of martyrdom. The last category in Jewish law, *Kiddush Ashem*, is properly translated as “the sanctification of the name of God.” This concept is inherently social since it incorporates community commitment and solidarity (albeit limited!) with the oppressed. According to the concept of *Kiddish Ashem* Jews are obliged to transgress any law except for three: worship of another god, murder, and incestuous intercourse, in order to save their lives. Martyrdom is thus not acceptable, except in these three cases (Sanhedrin 74a). Jews are even allowed to worship another God on the condition that the community is not present and if by doing so they may save their lives (Tos. Avoda Zarah 54a). In addition, this law emerges from a period during which, according to Emmanuel Levinas, Jews were “the Other,” “the oppressed,” “the Exteriority” of western history. Therefore, the commitment to “the community of oppressed” that Jewish orthopraxis offers should be seen as a middle ground between Lundberg’s Christian “martyrdom of confession” and his “martyrdom of solidarity”. This middle ground recognizes the necessity of solidarity with the oppressed, but it limits that necessity, I must admit, to solidarity with fellow Jews.

The most remembered cases of Jewish martyrdom (Rabbi Akiva and the ten martyrs in the beginning of the Common Era, the atrocities of the Crusades, and the European Holocaust during the 20<sup>th</sup> century) follow the above-mentioned limitation. Nevertheless, at least theoretically, the discussion of the extension of solidarity and/or the obligation toward martyrdom did generate a division among the rabbinical sages (e.g. Talmud Jer. 4:3, 35b). However, the possibility of extending the concept of solidarity to non-Jews was not expressed in concrete form until the *Yad-Vashem* Holocaust museum in Israel included non-Jews that saved Jews during the Holocaust among those given special honor. In spite of this symbolic decision ( which was made more by secular and, paradoxically, Zionist Jews than by the rabbinical school), the institutional narrative of the Holocaust (i.e., understanding that the message of the Holocaust is merely self-defense instead of solidarity) disrupted this traditional understanding of martyrdom, which has an intimate relationship with the path that radical thinkers such as Rose Luxemburg, Gustav Landauer, and Walter Benjamin took during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In consequence, and paradoxically, Jewish groups who held to a more sensitive concept of martyrdom before 1945 have forgotten the component of solidarity with the oppressed that they formerly included in the concep-

tion of martyrdom. After the Holocaust (1933-42/1945), and especially after the Six Day War (1967), they have chosen instead to embrace a narrative of pro-oppression martyrdom. In other words, their narrative supports slogans such as "Massada will not taken again," "the 614<sup>th</sup> commandment is to survive even if it carries oppression," and "never again another Holocaust" as a license of for self-empowerment and the oppression of "Others" — that is, the Palestinians — instead of engaging, as Lundberg's proposal suggests, their solidarity with the oppressed outside their (Jewish) world.

In spite of the post-1945 events in Israel we can assert that there is a natural connection between a pre-1945 Jewish "martyrdom of solidarity" and a post-1945 liberationist Christian "martyrdom of solidarity". There are, nevertheless, certainly differences between these two conceptions of martyrdom, and this disagreement should be, I think, a starting point for dialogue. Lundberg's readings of the "prophetic dimension" of the Latin American liberation theology are possibly attached to Walter Brueggemann's and, to some extent, Sobrino's interpretation of the prophets. The acceptance of death as a price for social struggle, influenced by a Christological framework, is not supported by Jewish thought. In place of this acceptance of death, some Jews, like Abraham Joshua Heschel, would offer this alternative: the acceptance of the risk of death instead of death itself. In other words, death is not seen as inherently redemptive in mainstream Jewish thought. However, a commitment on the part of Jews and Christians to sharing the same prophetic texts and the same contexts of struggle could certainly be considered the first steps towards a fruitful dialogue about martyrdom, a dialogue which intends to agree on the right to disagree.

I would like to offer a few remarks on why I think this liberationist dialogue could be especially fruitful around the problem of martyrdom. Lundberg states that Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reflection on the Jewish Holocaust is the first model for a liberationist reevaluation of the concept of martyrdom in the Christian tradition (5, 24). It is useful here, I think, to remember that it has been not just in the 20th century that the way in which martyrdom has been interpreted by Christians has arisen out of Christian and Jewish *dialogue in praxis*. Daniel Boyarin asserts that there are two traditional historical explanations for why the interpretation of death which Lundberg calls, "martyrdom of confession" originally arose within the Christian tradition. One claims that this way of framing these deaths was inherited from the Jews, the second proclaims that it was a Roman legacy. Contradicting both of these claims, Boyarin asserts that the conception of martyrdom in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries emerged as a *dialectical con-*

*versation*, sometimes violent, between two young brother/sister communities: Christianity and Rabbinical Judaism (Boyarin 1999:1-21). It appears to me that the way in which martyrdom began to be reconceived in the 20<sup>th</sup> century grew out of a similar dynamic of dialectical conversation. We can hope that the difference between these communities which was a source of violence 2000 years ago can, today, be a source of mutual understanding within that difference.

Contemporary Jewish-Christian liberationist dialogue around the nature of martyrdom need not be merely a naive new start, because we can draw upon the liberationist examples of the praxis of our predecessors. As Lundberg notes, Bonhoeffer, the first Christian who proposed the new concept of martyrdom that Lundberg himself is offering, did so while confronting the Jewish Holocaust. Furthermore, Bonhoeffer's approach resurfaced in the deep relationship that Martin Luther King Jr. and Abraham Joshua Heschel shared in America during the 60s, as well as the relationship between the Argentine liberation theologians of the non-denominational Protestant Instituto Superior de Educación Teológica and Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer, from the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano, founder of the praxis of a Jewish liberation theology in Latin America during the 70s and early 80s. Keeping in mind Lundberg's recognition of Bonhoeffer as the first person to articulate the "martyrdom of solidarity" model, and reviewing the subsequent heritage of Bonhoeffer's model in both Americas, can thus help us interpret the cross-commonalities in the way Jews and Christians are conceiving martyrdom as being the results of: 1) a common liberationist framework of categories and 2) the way in which martyrdom became a central concept in liberationist dialogue.

In conclusion, we can assert that Lundberg's proposal, the reformulation of Christian martyrdom in light of current social struggles, is revolutionary, not only within his own community, but also in the way in which it opens up dialogue with other faith communities, such as the Jews. My response to Lundberg's paper has focused upon two issues: Jewish martyrdom (traditional pre-1945 and liberationist post-1945) and the new Christian "martyrdom of solidarity". The inherently social commitment of both Jewish and Christian conceptions of martyrdom, as well as their dialogical nature, leads me to insist that various models of martyrdom deserve to be analyzed with respect to the cross-commonalities between both brother/sister traditions. This analysis should be guided by the "first agreement": the right to disagree — in this case, to disagree about what particular models of martyrdom should result from relying upon liberationist conceptions for their construc-

tion. But this analysis should also recognize the collaboration of "the Other" in our own constructions.

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