

## ON CONTEMPORARY MARTYRS: SOME RECENT LITERATURE

LAWRENCE S. CUNNINGHAM

*[This brief ongoing survey reviews some current literature on martyrs with special emphasis on those who have died for the faith in our own time. The author also addresses the claim that this literature is not only hagiographic (in the best sense of the word) but also a frequently overlooked resource for theological reflection.]*

WRITING ABOUT saints in general and martyrs in particular has continued apace since my last survey of recent literature on hagiography.<sup>1</sup> This present survey focuses on literature about martyrs and, more specifically, modern martyrs because of the prominence that Pope John Paul II has put on that phenomenon with his insistence on the sign value of the martyr as a witness to the perennial value of the gospel and its message.<sup>2</sup> The theological significance of martyrdom in the writings of the pope is a conspicuous characteristic of his thinking. He puts such emphasis on the theological significance of martyrdom, especially martyrdom in our day, that he singles out, among other things, the significance of those who died for the sake of Christ as a kind of primordial ecumenical bond prior to the actual workings of ecumenical reconciliation. His reflection in *Ut unum sint* bears remembering:

In a theocentric vision, we Christians already have a common martyrology. This also includes the martyrs of this century, more numerous than one might think, and

LAWRENCE S. CUNNINGHAM is John A. O'Brien Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame. He received his S.T.L. from the Gregorian University, and his Ph.D. from Florida State University. His most recent book is *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* (Eerdmans, 1999). He is currently working on an anthology of the spirituality of John Henry Newman, as well as on a book highlighting the theological vision of St. Francis of Assisi.

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence S. Cunningham, "Saints and Martyrs: Some Contemporary Considerations," *Theological Studies* 60 (1999) 529–37.

<sup>2</sup> I have surveyed the papal thinking on martyrdom in my contribution: "The Universal Call to Holiness: Martyrs of Charity and Witnesses of Truth," in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia Jubilee Volume: The Wojtyla Years* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2001) 109–16. On the papal emphasis on canonization, see the remarks of Richard McBrien, "The Saints: An Ecclesiological Reflection," *Theology Digest* 48 (Winter, 2001) 303–17.

it shows how, at a profound level, God preserves communion among the baptized in the supreme sacrifice of life itself.<sup>3</sup>

No account of contemporary martyrdom, however, can ignore the background of ancient and early martyrdom in the Christian tradition if only to understand how more recent understandings of martyrdom stand in contrast to, or, conversely, as a mirror of, the ancient martyr tradition. Over the past few years, to aid this understanding, we have had the advantage of a number of excellent works on early martyrdom that help us contextualize the contemporary discussion. Daniel Boyarin's recent book focuses on the narrative quality of martyrdom as a constructive element in creating as well as sustaining a religious tradition.<sup>4</sup> He asserts that we should "think of martyrdom as a 'discourse'—as a practice of dying for God and of talking about it, a discourse that changes and develops over time. . ."<sup>5</sup> The importance of discourse is worth underscoring since, in the Christian tradition, we remember the martyrs both by telling their stories in various ways and by enhancing the stories of some martyrs by performative narration in liturgical and non-liturgical worship. Boyarin's book is heavily influenced by postmodern literary discourse so it is useful, without being reductionistic, to remember, when reading the somewhat cerebral discussion of Boyarin, that it is both the actual witness of the martyr and also the memory of the martyr captured in some form of discourse that enters most completely into a religious tradition. The death of the martyr, in other words, happened, then subsequently gets "constructed" both as a narrative of fact and as a moment remembered by the community.

Such a discourse, however, as a constructed one will lead different people to construct the discourse differently. How such discourses differ is amply illustrated by the work of Brad Gregory who examines martyrdom narratives of every kind emanating from Protestant (including Anabaptist) and Catholic sources in the post-Reformation period.<sup>6</sup> Gregory roots his analysis in the medieval literary tradition of the *ars moriendi* showing its flowering in everything from visual illustrations to drama. He is sensitive to the classic texts of Scripture as well as to the opportunity that such narratives provide for polemical and homiletic purposes. What is particularly striking about Gregory's book is his resistance to reductionism. He reads his sources as coming from persons both Protestant and Catholic who died

<sup>3</sup> *Ut unum sint* no. 84; text in *Origins* 25 (June 8, 1995) 67.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 94.

<sup>6</sup> Brad S. Gregory, *Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1999).

for their faith. That seemingly obvious point sometimes gets lost in contemporary analyses of martyrdom literature but Gregory makes it forcefully. As such his book is important in its own right and as a counterbalance to the work of Boyarin precisely by his insistence on the faith element in the witness of the martyr.

One cannot speak of the construction of discourse without sensitivity to the issue of gender. The past decade has seen research with a precise focus on that issue ranging from a monograph-length study of the passion of Perpetua and Felicity<sup>7</sup> to more detailed essays dealing with gender issues and early martyrdom texts.<sup>8</sup> All such studies pay careful attention to the literary form of the acts and passions that have come to us from antiquity as well as the settings in which those narratives were first produced and their intended audiences.<sup>9</sup>

### CONTEMPORARY MARTYRS

One keeps in mind such historical studies as well as the vast hagiographical literature and iconography of the past when one considers the situation of contemporary martyrs. That contemporary witness has received recent recognition in stone with the dedication of ten statues in niches over the west front of Westminster Abbey in London. The ensemble was blessed in 1998 by the Archbishop of Canterbury with Queen Elizabeth II in attendance. The ten representative figures, drawn from the Russian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Baptist churches are meant to be emblematic of those who died for Christ in the 20th century.<sup>10</sup> Those represented range from such well-known figures as Martin Luther King Jr., Maximilian Kolbe, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer to the Presbyterian Esther John murdered in Pakistan and the Anglican catechu-

<sup>7</sup> Joyce Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York: Routledge, 1997); see also Brent Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," *Past and Present* no. 139 (May, 1993) 3–45.

<sup>8</sup> Gillian Clar, "Bodies and Blood: Late Antique Debate on Martyrdom, Virginity, and Resurrection," in *Changing Bodies*, ed. Dominic Montserrat (London: Routledge, 1998) 99–115. Gail Ashton, *The Generation of Identity in Late Medieval Hagiography* (New York: Routledge, 2000) has material on medieval martyrdom, but see the cautionary words of Amy Hollywood's review in *Spiritus* 1 (Spring 2001) 116–18.

<sup>9</sup> See Ekkehard Muhlenberg, "The Martyr's Death and its Literary Presentation," *Studia Patristica* 29 (1997) 85–93. In terms of the cult of the martyr one should also consult the new work of John Crook, *The Architectural Setting of the Cult of the Saints in the Early Christian West* (New York: Oxford University, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Their lives are described in *The Terrible Alternative*, ed. Andrew Chandler (London: Cassell, 1998).

men Manche Masemola killed by her animist parents in South Africa in 1928.

Robert Royal has done us the good service of surveying the 20th-century landscape of Christian martyrdom.<sup>11</sup> His book, based on a wide but selective range of secondary sources and almost exclusively concerned with Roman Catholics, not only gives a country-by-country survey but also intersperses the broad sweep of that survey with individual biographies of martyrs. His is the only book that I know of in English that attempts such a comprehensive résumé of modern martyrs (although it would be impossible to be fully comprehensive given the sheer numbers of such martyrs). Professor Andrea Riccardi, an academic historian and the founder of the Sant'Egidio community in Rome, has also contributed a hefty volume on the subject (already in its third edition).<sup>12</sup> This is not yet available in English.

The papers from a symposium held in Rome at the Pontifical Atheneum Regina Apostolorum in honor of modern martyrs has recently been published in Spanish in a quarterly sponsored by that institute.<sup>13</sup> The symposium was organized as part of the celebrations of the Jubilee Year (2000) in Rome. Unfortunately, the collected essays are, in the main, rather discursive in character and, with a few exceptions, provide no bibliographical material beyond a few scattered footnotes. The earlier issue of the journal, already cited, did have an appendix reproducing some of the homilies on martyrs given by John Paul II in the past few years. Yet even that dossier of papal pronouncements excised the notes that are usually provided in the *Acta apostolicae sedis*. The lack of documentation makes the essays in *Ecclesia* of general interest in their own right but less than helpful for the scholarly world and inadequate for bibliographical leads. What could have been a useful survey unfortunately reflects signs of haste.

A recent article on the martyrs of El Salvador<sup>14</sup> is helpful in its survey of literature from the early period down to our day on the criteria for determining in what Christian martyrdom consists. That question is not merely

<sup>11</sup> Robert Royal, *The Catholic Martyrs of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Andrea Riccardi, *Il secolo del martirio: I cristiani nel novecento* (Milan: Mondadori, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> "Los Martires del siglo XX," *Ecclesia* 14, 2/3 (April–September 2000) with essays on martyrs in Mexico, Russia, Brazil, the Nazi era, Polish martyrs in Auschwitz, martyrs in Croatia and Yugoslavia, and the Spanish Civil War; "Martires del siglo XX—2" *Ecclesia* 15, 1 (January–March, 2001) with a biographical essay on 28 Mexican martyrs and studies of martyrdom in China, Korea, and Africa. There is also a study of the Trappist martyrs in Algeria.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Schubeck, "Salvadoran Martyrs: A Love that Does Justice," *Horizons* 28 (Spring, 2001) 7–21.

of academic interest as reflected in the debate at the time of the canonization of Edith Stein: did she die as a Christian martyr or because of the Nazi's hatred of Jews? The question can be extended: Did the martyrs of El Salvador die *in odium fidei* which is the historic test for proclaiming someone a martyr? Was Archbishop Romero a martyr in the classic sense or was he a victim of a political assassin?

Schubeck persuasively argues that Thomas Aquinas in his day and Karl Rahner in our own have expanded the concept of martyrdom by noting that there is a complex of virtues involving charity, fortitude, and doing justice in imitation of Christ that go beyond the simple formula of seeing martyrdom as dying because the killers hate the faith (*in odium fidei*).<sup>15</sup> Schubeck's analysis seems quite close to the thinking of John Paul II in writings (e.g., *Veritatis splendor*; *Ut unum sint*; *Donum vitae*; *Ecclesia in America*) and in various allocutions on the occasions of beatifications and canonizations. The criteria for contemporary martyrdom might be summed up by applying three criteria: (1) someone must have been murdered or died as a result of mistreatment; (2) the persecutor had to have been motivated by hatred of the faith or hatred of the practice of some virtues essential to it; (3) the martyrs had to have acted with the awareness that their conduct might cost their lives.<sup>16</sup>

For understanding better how to characterize some of these new kinds of martyrs perhaps we could take a page from the Russian Orthodox practice with respect to saints. Their tradition honors those who are "fools for the sake of Christ" (*Iurodivyi*), but, in addition, they single out those who are called the "Passion bearers" (*Strastoterpsi*) who suffer for the sake of the kingdom in the imitation of Christ and through the exercise of non-violence. The eleventh-century brothers, Boris and Gleb, who died violently at the hands of their brother were the first saints canonized in the Russian Church and have been considered the prototypical examples of

<sup>15</sup> Schubeck cites *Summa theologiae* 2-2, q. 124, a. 2 for Thomas Aquinas, and Karl Rahner, "Dimensions of Martyrdom: A Plea for the Broadening of a Classical Concept," in *Martyrdom Today*, ed. Johannes Baptist Metz and Edward Schillebeeckx, *Concilium* 163 (New York: Seabury, 1983) 9-11 ("Salvadoran Martyrs" 11). Saints Anselm and Bernard of Clairvaux and others have written on differing criteria for martyrdom as well; for examples, see my article "Truth and Consequences: Past or Present, What Makes a Martyr?" *U.S. Catholic* (December 2001) 36-40.

<sup>16</sup> I have taken these criteria from Jaime Covarrubias, S. J., "A Martyrology for the Twentieth Century: Jesuits who Died for the Love of God and Man," *Yearbook of the Society of Jesus 2000* (Rome: Curia of the Society of Jesus, 2000) 150-55, at 150. For further background on Jesuit witnesses, see the historical survey, George M. Anderson, S. J., *With Christ in Prison: Jesuits in Jail from St. Ignatius to the Present* (New York: Fordham University, 2000).

this kind of sanctity but others have also received that kind of honorific.<sup>17</sup> It may well have been this kind of sanctity that John Paul II had in mind when, during the Greek-rite liturgy for the beatification of the Ukrainian martyrs he described those martyrs as “icons of the Gospel of the Beatitudes.”<sup>18</sup>

Over the past decade, most likely as a response to the papal emphasis on the martyrs of our own time, there has also been a growing literature on single figures who have died for the faith. A few examples of such studies have recently come to my attention.

A diocesan inquiry has been forwarded to Rome for the cause of Father Giuseppe Puglisi, a priest from the archdiocese of Palermo, who was assassinated by a Mafia hit man on September 15, 1993, his 56th birthday. Puglisi was an implacable foe of the local Mafia both for their criminality and their malignant influence on the population in general and the young in particular. A priest who had labored with the poor, possessed of a reputation for holiness and social action, Puglisi loved the pastoral talks and prophetic challenges made by the pope on his visits to Sicily. He was especially heartened by the papal denunciation of criminality in general and the mafia in particular. After his death, the pope singled him out for his courage and love of the truth. Puglisi has now become the subject of an excellent biography written by a prominent Sicilian journalist and parishioner of the slain priest.<sup>19</sup> The final chapters of that work analyze Puglisi’s witness against the background of the more recent understanding of martyrdom found in today’s Church. Deliziosi quotes an interesting comment made by the Sicilian theologian, Bartolomeo Sorge, to the effect that in the ancient church people died *in odium fidei* (out of hatred for the faith) whereas today many martyrs have died *in odium caritatis* (out of hatred for love).<sup>20</sup>

In the last decade of the 20th century perhaps no single country saw as much violence against Christians as Algeria. A dissident Islamic fundamentalist faction killed some 30 religious, priests, including one bishop as part of a campaign to bring down what they saw as an illegitimate govern-

<sup>17</sup> I found very little accessible information on this type of sanctity but did find useful Elisabeth Behr-Sigel’s essay “The Kenotic, the Humble Christ,” in *Discerning the Signs of the Time*, ed. Michael Plekon and Sarah Hinkley (Crestwood, N.Y.: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary, 2001) 31–32; see also Tomas Spidlik, *The Spirituality of the Christian East* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1986) 138–39 with further bibliography.

<sup>18</sup> From the homily cited in the English-language edition of *L’Osservatore Romano*, July 4, 2001, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Francesco Deliziosi, *Don Puglisi: vita del prete palermitano ucciso della mafia* (Milan: Mondadori, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 279–80. Deliziosi cites Maximilian Kolbe and Oscar Romero along with Puglisi as exemplars of these “new martyrs.”

ment.<sup>21</sup> The most sanguinary event of that unhappy time was the kidnaping and subsequent execution by beheading of seven Trappist monks on May 21, 1996. The event was made the more poignant because two years earlier, the prior of the monastery, Dom Christian de Chergé, wrote and sealed a letter which was to be opened only in the event of his violent death. The letter was opened at Pentecost after the death of the seven monks.<sup>22</sup> The letter is an extraordinary document for the study of martyrdom. Dom Christian wrote that he knew how precarious their situation was at the monastery. He wrote that if he was killed he did not want the reaction to be a reaction against Islam or a caricature of the Islamic faith. He indicated that he remained in Algeria as a fraternal presence (Dom Christian was deeply involved in interreligious dialogue). In the closing paragraph of the letter he directly addresses his killer saying that someday they “two good thieves” would meet in paradise before the God they both worshiped if God wills and bids him adieu.

While there has been some useful but scattered articles<sup>23</sup> about these Trappist martyrs, we now have an excellent full-length book by an author who understood the Algerian situation, the kind of life the monks attempted to live, and their complete resistance to any temptation to proselytize among the local population.<sup>24</sup> What is most interesting about Guitton’s book is his account of a 19th-century Trappist foundation (suppressed at the turn of the 20th century by the anticlerical Republican government of the time) nourished by the colonial government of France as part of the *mission civilitrice* of France. The stark difference between that settlement

<sup>21</sup> There is a list of some of those killed in Armand Veilleux, “Los Martires de Tibhirine,” *Ecclesia* 15/1 (2001) 169–85; English translation in “The Witness of the Tibhirine Martyrs,” *Spiritus* (Fall 2001) 205–16 including a brief biography of the Dominican bishop of Oran, Pierre Claverie who was murdered in 1993. Veilleux drew on Jean-Jacques Perennes, *Pierre Claverie: Un Algérien par alliance* (Paris: Cerf, 2000), a book to which I have not had access.

<sup>22</sup> The full text of that letter and other materials relative to the event of the monks’ martyrdom are posted on the Web: [[http://www.agora.stm.it/A\\_Viellieux/atlas.htm](http://www.agora.stm.it/A_Viellieux/atlas.htm)].

<sup>23</sup> The most useful survey with a good bibliography is: Donald McGlynn, “Atlas Martyrs,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 32 (1997) 149–87. McGlynn also reproduces Father Christian’s letter in an appendix (188–89). Julian Doherty, “The Wider Horizon of the Algeria of the Heart,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 32 (1997) 195–221 provides valuable background material. The earlier essay by Basil Pennington, “The Cistercian Martyrs of Algeria, 1996,” *Review for Religious* 55 (1996) 601–12 is basically reportorial in nature.

<sup>24</sup> René Guitton, *Si nous nous taisons . . . Le martyre des moines de Tibhirine* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2001). John W. Kiser, *The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2002) is an excellent study of the Atlas martyrs which provides an extensive bibliography (321–29).

(whose motto was “For Sword, Cross, and Plow”) and what the monks who came to Algeria decades later established is a shorthand study of how mission theory and evangelization had changed within a century.

Guitton’s study is also useful for its description of the reaction in France, both civil and religious, about the abduction of the monks, the fate of the monastery of Our Lady of the Atlas, and future projections for Christian-Islamic relations in Algeria.<sup>25</sup> In the final analysis the significance of the martyrs of Algeria may abide in helping us understand how small groups of Christians (especially contemplatives) may serve as a witness to the truth of the gospel in an environment that may be either indifferent or perhaps hostile.

The narratives of these martyrs, the way their memory is held within the believing community, and the performative character of their discipleship makes the martyrs, both ancient and contemporary, a rich resource for theological reflection.<sup>26</sup> Jon Sobrino, who experienced how his companions died for the faith in El Salvador, has understood this fact better than most. In his recently published *Christ the Liberator* (2001; original Spanish 1999), Sobrino argues that there is an analogy between the Beloved Son and the martyr: “in our world there are those who carry out a mission and are destroyed by it, ending up like the suffering servant, weak and powerless; there are many martyrs who today express this total identification with the servant.”<sup>27</sup>

Martyrdom, however, is not only about being crushed by suffering and hatred. The Suffering Servant becomes, in the end, the Resurrected One. For that reason Sobrino sees martyrdom as deeply rooted in the Good News. That martyrdom is Good News, of course, seems like a paradox. Paradoxical or not, it is true since, as he writes, “In a world such as ours, full of lies and cruelty, martyrs tell us that truth and love, firmness and faithfulness, and love to the end are possible. And that is good news.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> One hopeful sign: the President of Algeria, in the name of the government, supported an international colloquium held in March/April 2001 in Algiers and Hippo in honor of Saint Augustine. The colloquium was a joint effort of the Augustinianum in Rome, the local church in Algeria, and the patronage of the Algerian government. It was the first time Saint Augustine was so honored.

<sup>26</sup> Single studies of contemporary martyrs provide much material for reflection. Cynthia Glavac, *In the Fullness of Life: A Biography of Dorothy Kazel, O.S.U.* (Denville, N.J.: Dimension Books, 1996) is not only an excellent biography of one of the women murdered in El Salvador but a fine study based on solid research of Sister Kazel’s spiritual life. Books like this are an invaluable resource.

<sup>27</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001). 189. Sobrino makes that point at greater length in his *Jesus the Liberator* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 264–71.

<sup>28</sup> *Christ the Liberator* 217.