MARTYRS AND MARTYROLOGIES

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CHOOlNG DEATH? EXPERIENCES OF MARTYRDOM IN LATE MEDIEVAL EUROPE

by MIRI RUBIN

Probably one of the most emotive words in our ethical and religious languages, 'martyrdom' poses the historian with a complex array of powerful images and awesome actions. Its very naturalness, as a grounding moment through which religions and radical movements are substantiated and made public, raises serious problems of perspective, empathy, judgement: studying martyrdom brings us in touch with some of the most admirable and some of the most repugnant and saddening aspects in human behaviour. Religious, parties, and nations claim martyrs as unambiguous signs of virtue, truth, and moral justification, and thus render martyrdom seemingly obvious. Painful, yes, but admirable; chilling, but satisfying, since in it men and women turn into gods, become myth-makers, and lend legitimation to whoever may claim them. So martyrdom—its discussion, definition, the claim to its virtue and beauty—is always open to appropriation, to competition, to contestation.

Although martyrdom is presented as an absolute, it is intrinsically amenable to historical change. As I researched and reflected on it over the last year in response to your kind invitation, I found myself wrestling with a variety of impressions which grew into observations on the relative nature of experiences of pain and death claimed as martyrdom. It soon became clear that the act of martyrdom is twofold: it is a choice taken in testifying circumstances by an individual or a group; but it is also a social-collective act, that of martyr-making, of martyr-naming. Thus a double-edged perspective is necessary in order to contain the variety of contexts in which martyrdom is practised: in the intention of the martyr/victim, and in the interpretations of those who will declare a given demise to be the crowned death of a martyr. As we enter the area of interpretation we must be aware of the various fields of authority and dissent, of perspective and subjectivity; of meaning, as one man's cult of a martyr is another woman's superstition.

During the central and later medieval centuries acts of martyrdom had
lost their spectacular presence as Christianity was being disseminated into a largely pagan world north-west and east of the Mediterranean basin. Even after the first rush of epoch-making martyrdoms in the Roman Empire, the frontiers of mission and the political frontiers of Christianity and Islam were producing a trickle of martyrdom encounters, and figures who were integrated into the world of liturgy, prayer, and popular example. The early martyrs, with whose blood Christianity had become established in the Roman world, were joined by a sprinkling of missionary monks, victims of Muslim conquest, or of the ravages of the Norsemen. But as Europe came to be a Christian community, occasions for persecution and execution by tyrants and hostile pagan rulers declined. There was a definite sense in which martyrdom was receding—that martyrs were few and precious; that their remains were treasures which could not be matched.1 The dilemma now faced was to shape the meaning of the tradition of martyrdom: how should this world come to terms with this end of martyrdom? What should be the appropriate location and use of memories of martyrs be? What authority might those who had not suffered an equal sacrifice claim in a Christian world? To martyrdom could be added the growing sustained notion of sainthood; and the legacy of martyrdom interacted with popular notions of justice and virtue which were to produce impulses towards martyr-naming increasingly divergent from official ecclesiastical choices.2

But let us first think of the mundane use, through metaphor and metonymy, by which the notion of martyrdom was deployed in daily life. A patient would complain of his martyrdom at the hands of a physician.3 When Froissart described the terrible carnage after the siege of Limoges, in 1370, he wrote, 'May the Lord receive their souls for they were true martyrs.'4 The engaging Brother Giles, one of the early Franciscans, used to say as he retired to his cell after dinner, and having been tormented by the Devil in the past, 'Expecto martyrium.' 5 Martyrdom was incorporated into the routines of self-mortification, into lifestyles of difference, of self-conscious testing and torment. It also induced the study and contemplation, the writing, reading, and representation of martyrs of old, and narratives of martyrdom, the passiones, came to be seen as veritable holy relics. The Early South-English Legendary, of c.1280, conveys such a sense view in its vita of St Kenelm, a Mercian prince who was allegedly killed by his sister's order in 821. There the account of the martyrdom is conveyed to Rome by a divine missive:

The narrative of martyrdom thus became a deposit of truth and tradition, which could be read, or treated as a magical link with the past. It came to find its place in the elaborate liturgical incorporation of martyr-lore in the readings and the litanies of feast days and into the office of the Mass. Martyrdom lore was also absorbed into new literary forms by the eleventh century, as authors of heroic deeds blended the epic and the narrative of martyrdom.6 Think of the great Chansons de geste, whose heroes could rival the milites Christi and his successors; was their effort not a witness of faith? were their strivings and ultimate deaths not in the service of the faith? In the Chanson de Roland, Archbishop Turpin exhorted the fighting men before Roncevaux to confess and pray, but assured them that those who died would be martyrs and reach paradise before the Day of Judgement. The Church of St Romanus, at Blaye, claimed to possess the remains of

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3 N. G. Siraisi, Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine: an Introduction to Knowledge and Practice (Chicago, 1990), p. 169.
7 A. G. Elliott, Roads to Paradise: Reading the Lives of the Early Saints (Hanover, NH, 1992), pp. 182-4.
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Roland, Oliver, Turpin, and others, and a twelfth-century pilgrim's guidebook to the route to Compostella mentions the site, and the body of 'beati Rotolandi martyris'. Thus notions and values of martyrdom intersected with the literature of warriors' deeds to provide a whole new layer of meaning for the lives of those who fought for Christianity and died for it.

So the telling of martyrdoms contained powerful messages which could be embellished for new generations. But the cessation of martyrdom also led to the development of new options for perfection in other types of death. Already Gregory the Great could write of spiritual martyrdom, and in the eleventh and twelfth centuries robust notions of an exemplary and painful life as a passio were taking root. The author of the *Hall Melehad* in the mid-twelfth century claimed that virginity could be the equal of any ancient martyr's death, signalling one of the most persistent themes in female spirituality. A death to sexual reproductive life was inverted into a life in Christ as his special bride, and the late medieval authors likened the choice of a life of virginity to a death and rebirth as Christ's bride. The Middle English *Life of Seinte Juliana* of c.1230 describes her being stripped by her father for whipping by her tormentors, when she exclaimed:

Swa suche quoð la ich iuware: So ich derute ping for his lune drehce.10

St Agnes's death is described in Osbern Bokenham's *Life of c.1445*:

And þis þis holy mayde, þis innocent, 
Cruefully martyred for erystys sake, 
To hym as hys spouse he dide take.11

And this purity preserved for the ultimate lover was dramatically mocked by tormentors, who attempted to violate it, like those of Lucy, who sent her to a brothel. So the martyrology of old were being rewritten and translated to provide examples for lives of perfection. The lives of female virgin martyrs were the staple of monastic and lay reading and spectatorship in plays and sermons and iconography. Martyrdom was preserved as a tradition which provided some guide-lines for perfect lives.

But could any contemporary form of perfecttion rival or displace the authority of ancient martyrdom? In the world of late medieval Christianity—warred, localized, multifarious, full of flavour and accent, questions and dissent—the Church recognized very few martyrs. Christian martyrs may, in fact, have been fewer, but what is striking is the steering away from naming and recommending as martyrs people who had suffered death in the recent past. Becket in the twelfth century and Peter Martyr in the next are notable exceptions. This tension is reflected in the attitudes which were developing within the Franciscan Order itself, towards the legacy of perfection and mission left by St Francis. Although Francis did not die for his faith, despite his many attempts to imperil his life in mission, he was none the less marked with the most powerful mark of confirmation and authorization, he had lived the *imitatio Christi* through the *stigmata* given to him and marked on his body (see plate 1). In his *Vita prima*, written in 1228, Thomas of Celano links *stigmata* and Francis's earlier attempts to seek martyrdom in mission, to Syria, Morocco, and Spain:

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The *Vita secunda* written by him twenty years later gives a much more diffuse notion of the event; it is described as very private, the witness—of old were being rewritten and translated to provide examples for lives of perfection. The lives of female virgin martyrs were the staple of monastic and lay reading and spectatorship in plays and sermons and iconography. Martyrdom was preserved as a tradition which provided some guide-lines for perfect lives.

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Bonaventure's hand, Minister General since 1256, a sure line of succession and authority was attached to the stigmata, linking it to Francis's rule and to papal patronage:

Ad eum observantiam fratres ferventer inducens, dicebat, se nihil ibi possisse secundum industriam propriam, sed omnia sic scribi fecisse, sicut sibi fuerant divinitus revelata. Quod ut certius constaret testimonio Dei, paucis admodum, diebus evolutis impressa sunt ei stigmata Domini Iesu digito Dei vivi tanquam bulla summi Pontificis Christi ad confirmationem omnimoda regulae et commendationem auctoris, sicut post suarum enarrationem virtutum suo loco inferior desceritur. 14

Bonaventure himself imitated the great imitator of Christ, as he ascended Mount Alverna to contemplate and pray and hope for illumination, and to receive the same burning mark of love on his body. 15 So a whole world of Franciscan writing interpreted that singular experience in the literature of perfection which followed. Most notably, Bonaventure in his commentary on the *Regula bullata* claimed Francis's legacy to the Order as one of martyrdom, the highest level of love of Christ, and mission as the highest context for the realization of that love in conjunction with the love for one's neighbour, whom Christ had come to redeem, through attempts at conversion. Martyrdom, and the martyrdom suffered in mission, was the highest level of union with God, through the physical living of Christ's Passion, juxtaposed with the imitation of his poverty. As the Franciscan Order suffered its fatal split in the debate about Poverty, a tragic twist was to create a new type of Franciscan martyr, as the followers of Peter John Olivi, the Beguines of Narbonne and Beziers, were persecuted, and hundreds were burnt around the year 1300. They were imitating Christ through the inspiration of a new prophet, Olivi, whose word was to them as holy as Scripture. These followers of Olivi turned his tomb into a shrine, and then offered themselves as martyrs as the inquisitorial fires burnt. We encounter here then the richness of martyrdom language, split and turned against itself within the Order. It is this density of meaning, and the possible inversions and relapses inherent in martyrdom language, which explain the papacy's wariness of going so far as endorsing forms of contemporary perfection as martyrdom, or indeed as sanctifying.

14 *St Bonaventure, Legenda maior*, in *Analecta franciscana*, 10, c.4, at p. 577.
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These tensions are manifest in the differing experiences of mission unto death which Franciscans came to experience as time passed. The earliest Franciscan martyrs are the group of seven who arrived in Morocco in the late summer of 1227, and of whose fate we are informed by a letter of Brother Mariano of Genoa to Elias. In the flush of enthusiasm, and still under the spell of Francis's own example, this group of Franciscans sailed to Ceuta and Morocco to begin their mission. Their story is anything but spectacular. Upon arrival they were thrown into gaol, where they laboured for eight days, and then, in mid-October, they were beheaded. Their journey verged on what thinkers later in the century would see as suicidal, as complicit with the tyrant's desires, and not qualifying for martyrdom, but these were heroes within the Order. The Order became more uneasy, uncomfortable with the uncontrolled and unplanned throwing of lives away in gestures which showed neither preparation nor introspection nor grave invention. The experience of two of late fourteenth-century Spanish Franciscans, Juan de Cetina and Pedro de Duenas, who were executed in the Alhambra in 1397 is instructive. Fitting with the model of personal development recommended by Bonaventure, these men joined the Order, spent years in study, spent time in spiritual retreat in Franciscan hermitages, then resolved to go on mission to the Muslims in the Holy Land, and sought permission, as required, from the Provincial of Castile. They never reached Jerusalem, because travelling south they passed through the Nazari kingdom, which they could have done quite safely had they behaved. But the missionary fervour was strong, and they began preaching against Islam in Grenada, and were arrested. The Vita claims that they were interrogated by the Sultan himself, and one version claims that he beheaded them with his own sword. Their bodies were recovered by the Mercedarian Brethren (an order founded by a Dominican in 1218, dedicated to the ransoming of Christians), and passed on to Cordova, where they began to work miracles, and enjoyed a martyr cult among the Spanish Franciscans. We encounter again missions/martyrs, but more explicitly controlled within the Order, and consciously integrated into forms of personal exploration, learning, and contemplation espoused by the Order. A tension is revealed here between the unwillingness of the central institutions of the Church to recognize living, contemporary martyrdom, and the active seeking of martyrdom within some of its most forceful milieus, that of Franciscan perfection. Francis's life was an ongoing attempt to achieve a perfect imitation of Christ through the quest for martyrdom, but it ultimately endorsed a life of perfection in the world, as his own body came to be approved by the red-hot marks on his stigmatized limbs. And this marking of the body, the burning of the human flesh, was appropriated into a practice which could inspire the many. Religious women, some of whom ended their days as shunned and degraded heretics, carried the sign: like Guilelma, the woman who appeared in Milan in the 1260s bearing a child in her arms, and who bore stigmata and was claimed to be the incarnation of the Holy Spirit. She was encouraged and protected by the Cistercians of Chiaravalle, outside the city, where she was buried after her death in 1271, only to be exhumed by papal decree in 1300, her body burnt, and her ashes strewn to the four corners of the earth, leaving nothing tangible from which a cult could be sustained. Or her contemporary Elizabeth of Spalbeek of Herkenrode Abbey, in the diocese of Liege, who claimed to have had stigmata. She drew venom from the pen of the Franciscan Gilbert of Tournai, who was outraged by her and by other Beguines, and described their lives in his collection of problematic practices prepared for the discussion of the Council of Lyons in 1274, the Collectio de scandalis ecclesiae:

Sunt apud nos mulieres, quae Beghinae vocantur, et quaedam eorum subtilitatis vigent et novitatibus gaudent. . . Inter huiusmodi muliereculas una est et fama surrexit iam quasi publica, quod ipsa est Christi stigmatibus insignita. Quod si verum est, non foveat latebras sed aperiatur hoc sciendum; si vero non est, hypocrisis et simulatio confundatur.

Female mysticism, and the type of initiations which could culminate in the claim of stigmata, were seen as subservient and lacking in credibility. They threatened the sort of balanced edifices of reason and faith, of love espoused by the Order.17

16 F. Russo, 'Le fonti della passione dei SS. martiri di Ceuta', Miscellanea franciscana, 34 (1936), pp. 110-6. Clare wished to go on mission to Morocco too, but was refused; on this and the early missions see Moorman, History of the Franciscan Order, pp. 228-32.
17 D. Cahuales, 'Dos mártires franciscanos en la Granada nazarí: Juan de Cetina y Pedro de Duenas', Estudios de Historia y de Arqueología medievales, 5-6 (1987-8), pp. 159-73.
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and intellectual knowledge which were being carefully wrought and exemplified in figures such as Anselm, Francis, and Aquinas. It also threatened the authority of parochial sacramental practice. These signs of gentle and non-violent imitation, the aipgnata, conceded a form of perfection which could be taken up, claimed, appropriated, and integrated into private worlds which eschewed order and authority. We witness, then, that in the generations which immediately followed Francis's example an engagement with the meaning of his message of perfection, with the tension between the ordinary and the charismatic, the routines of life and the disruption which is martyrdom, the tension between the poles Seamus Heaney has called 'penance and goals'.

Accustomed as we are to seek the models of martyrdom and perfection in groups of rigorous religious dedication, a whole new world of martyr-naming in late medieval society is revealed to us once we look beyond, at lay communities, as they honoured even some of their humblest members. Here is a sort of popular understanding of martyrdom, one which identified that supreme sacrifice in the suffering of the virtuous, of the pite, of the good, in sufferings undeserved, unmerited, and wantonly inflicted. A mentalité, a deep and engraved understanding, a sort of morality is here revealed. Innocence sullied, purity misunderstood, created not only sympathy, but a drive to remedy this breach of the cosmic order in acts of expiation through veneration and posthumous loving and tender care for the 'martyr'.

One of the most striking examples of such communal martyr-naming, which has reached us, thanks to the disapproval of that active Dominican Inquisitor Stephen of Bourbon, was the making of a martyr's cult around the most famous of greyhounds, Guinefort. In his De septem donis Spiritus Sancti written between 1254 and 1261, in the last of sixteen sections, that on Pride, Stephen deals with the forms of disobedience resulting from pride, among them superstitio. In his usual method he discusses the term and uses exempla to illustrate its workings:

Sic faciebant nuper in dioceso Lugdunensi, ubi, cum ego predicarem contra sorcella et confessiones audirem, multae mulieres confitebantur portasse se pueros suos apud sanctum Guinefortem. Et cum crederem esse sanctum aliquem, inquisivi, et audivi quod esset canis quidam leporarius, occisus per hunc modum.\(^{22}\)

Stephen is hardly a sympathetic observer of this local martyr cult. Inquisitors rarely are. And yet this collective impulse to mark and remedy the evil done, rectify the cosmic order by venerating the dog unjustly killed, reflects a desire to re-establish justice for fear of retribution (the lord's estate had been devastated); but also a wish to partake in the virtue which flows from the sacrifice implicit in martyrdom. And here we find a fundamental structure of martyrdom cult: once recognized as a martyr's death, that death is made into a significant marker: of one group as opposed to another, we and they, Christians and pagans, or, as in this case, righteous villagers and misguided lord. It is also a source of benefit, of grace. Proximity to it can bring health and protection. And here the popular cult of Guinefort differs little from the structure of the cult of the martyrs in early Christianity, where they were such markers, and where commemoration of martyrs served not only to animate and sustain the family and then the community of Christians, but to be used as the most powerful relics of early medieval society.\(^{24}\)

The contexts in which such popular recognition could be earned were varied, and they all bespoke an unjust violent death. There were women like the Danish Marguerite of Roskilde, killed in 1176 by her husband; or Panacea, a young woman killed by her mother-in-law in the village of


Valsena, in northern Italy, in 1383; or the simple Marguerite of Louvain, a
pre-pubescent boy for the purposes of Jewish ritual or as re-enactment of
executioners, was achieved by the spinner of the yarn. From that moment
on, not only was little William visited in Norwich to the enjoyment of the
town of Villers, in Brabant, in 1225 while travelling with her
employers, who were killed too. The cult developed under the patronage
of the Duke of Brabant (whose responsibility it was to ensure safety on
highways), and the Cistercian monastery of Villers.33

Innocent men could earn the veneration of popular cult, like Honorius
Buzan~ais in the thirteenth century, a livestock merchant who was
killed near Poitiers by some servants he had chastised; or Buonmercato de
Ferrare, a clerk who was lynched to death in 1383 on suspicion of having
killed the rector of a Ferrarese church. William of Rochester was a simple
pilgrim when he was killed in 1201 by an ungrateful foundling to whom
he had given protection; Gerald of Cologne was a German pilgrim, killed
by brigands near Cremona in 1441. Similarly, the German Nanrun was on
the pilgrimage route to Rome when he was apprehended by some priests
at Wolfranshausen, near Munich, accused of pedersasty, and burned alive.48

These pilgrims could have stayed at home, but they went on route, on a
quest, evoking the widespread convergence of the meaning of peregrinatio
and martyrium.27 Thus the anxieties related to travel abroad, distance from
friends and protectors, and the age-old frustrations of young viri-vitis old
(like the case of bride and mother-in-law), or of wife with violent
husband (like Marguerite of Roeskilde) were constructed through the
language of popular piety into rituals of reassuring vengeance for an
unjust death through the loving and aggrandising recognition of a
martyr's cult and martyrological retelling. Indeed, the

A. Vauxhe, La Saintet, pp. 173-4; Goodich, Via perfecta, p. 196.

Vauxhe, La Saintet, pp. 173-4. See the discussion in the context of Old Irish usage, T. Charles-Edwards, 'The social back­

\[\textit{Ancrene wisse (parts six and seven), ed. G. Shepherd, Exeter Medieval English Texts (Exeter, 1985), p. 9.}\]
This child martyr thus became assimilated not only into private prayer, but also into the aspirations of the monastery itself, the beneficiaries of his shrine and its merits. John Lydgate, monk of Bury, wrote a prayer, and the last stanza invokes all the merits of the martyr:

Have upon Bury thy gracious remembrance
That hast among them a chapel and a shrine,
With help of Edmund, preserve them from grevaunce,
King of Eflyngond, marre and virgnyn,
With whose bryth somne lat thy sterre shyne,
Streching your stremys throuth il pis regioun,
Pray for alle tho, and kep hem fro noyne,
That do reverence to both your passion.

The martyrdom trope is thus alive, as a younger martyr re-enforces the merits bequeathed by the old. Henry III had in his chapel in Nottingham Castle an altar-frontal of St William of Norwich, and an altar-frontal depicting William of Norwich which accompanied an altar-piece with St Edmund, King and Martyr. Edward I was interested in the cult of little Hugh of Lincoln, and provided his newly-built shrine at Lincoln with alms in 1299 and 1300, a decade after the expulsion of the Jews.

Liturically, literarily, in terms of its religious sentiment, here we have a martyrdom par excellence, and yet it is the type of martyrdom which the Church refused to recognize, despite the abiding strength of its appeal and the quasi-saintly location of its influence and cult. The Church felt very uncomfortable with new martyrs, and with child martyrs above all. Child martyrs just were—they had no history of saintliness, no life of growing merit, no biography of conscious religiosity; they were born and soon died, and were thus hard to evaluate, to grasp.

The story had soon reached Germany; by the mid-thirteenth century similar tales were told there. An interesting case is that of the Rhenish boy martyr Werner of Oberwesel. A number of southern German chronicles relate under the year 1287 that a boy, Werner, had been killed by the Jews. The boy was found dead, washed up on the bank of the Rhine at Bacharach—the body of a boy who had worked for some Jews at

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Oberwesel. He was identified by a serving-girl and was proclaimed to be the victim of the Jews for whom he had worked. His body began to work miracles, and as the pieces of the ritual murder accusation came together, a regional massacre flared up in which many Jews perished. Ultimately sentenced to death by decapitation. His remains were carried to his village an inscription on the tomb told of Arnold, a martyr who was cruelly killed by the Jews and their friends. His body was said to work miracles, and a cult developed around him, in the church where his remains rest until this day. 37

So a strong impulse towards the recognition of merit and its application to the common good moved people to recognize the victims of unmerited violence as martyrs, and to elaborate cultic practices in their honour. This was a far cry from the highly reflective turn which definitions of martyrdom were taking in scholarly discussion, and the rather stringent reserve with which the papacy and church hierarchy observed popular attempts to name contemporaries as martyrs comparable with those of the age of persecution. The merits of the early martyrs were, after all, embodied in the very fabric of the Church; they made the Church. Missionaries brought Christianity to pagan peoples, female martyrs kept the faith alive until it was formally recognized and allowed to flourish. The merits of the Apostles were grounded in the great cathedrals of Europe and the Near East, Christ's own blood and the relics of his Passion lay in Jerusalem and in choice deposits of his blood on European soil, and devotional works such as the Legenda aurea created a constant link with that source of early virtue and example. Theological discussion insisted on the element of choice in martyrdom, and explored the reaches of intention. Once a martyr was willing to die, death itself was no longer important, it merely sealed the perfection already achieved. The emphasis in such discussion is not on aim, but on knowing choice—little surprise, then, to find that so many martyrs were described in late medieval martyrologies as undergoing terrible and hideous torture, but never feeling a pain, nor suffering bodily injury. When Cecilia was scalded in a bath for a day and a night, she did not even sweat; when Juliana was bound and thrown into the fire, she prayed for deliverance for the sake of the bystanders, so angels descended and put out every spark. When she was put into a vessel of boiling pitch, it became

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cool and pleasant to the touch. 38 In these vernacular accounts the martyr is very much in control of her ordeal, with the help of her God. The moment of death is chosen, and the mise-en-scène controlled. The martyrological account moves between the need to fascinate, shock, and terrify in order to convey the sense of extraordinary ordeal, and a keenness to maintain the sense of God’s omnipotent control and the dignity and power of the martyr, the free will in the act.

Having explored this apparent divergence in modes of using the concept of martyrdom and the collective interpretations given to it in the later Middle Ages, having looked at the new types of martyrs who were animating piety, pilgrimage, and the fiercest identification, at a popular level, often unrecognized by official naming, let us now examine those who were recognized. Here again, a tradition of martyrdom had been created for every people: not only the Apostles, but the national heroes—a Boniface, a Denis. To these were added at distinct moments in the eleventh and twelfth centuries the crowns of martyred kings and princes who fought iniquity and toed a line of happy coexistence with the Church in the fragile Christian kingdoms of Europe: Edmund of East Anglia, martyred in 870; Olaf of Norway, killed in 1010; Boris and Gleb, killed in 1015, virgin sons of St Vladimir, first Christian Duke of Kiev. 39 The achievement of martyrdom would live on as the finest accolade for a king: Joinville’s Life of St Louis attempts, after all, to represent the King as a quasi-martyr. And most proudly the Church’s martyred bishops, standing fast against the other type of ruler, who threatened or at least challenged the new visita of a Christian society under papal leadership: St Stanislas, Bishop of Cracow, torn limb from limb at the altar in 1079 by King Boleslaus the Cruel (who had been excommunicated by the Bishop) who was canonized in 1253, and that dazzling martyr Thomas Becker, killed in 1172. 40 But by the mid-thirteenth century there seems to be a retreatment in thinking about the recognition of contemporary lived experience

38 For Cecilia see James of Voragine, Legenda aurea, ed. T. Graesse (Leipzig, 1805); c.160, p. 776. ‘Tunc irarus Almachius jussit earn ad domum suam reduci ubi que rota nacre et die jussit earn in bulliente balneo concernari. Quae quasi in loco frigido mansit nee modicum salern ut turbare poterit.’ The Early South English Legendary, p. 495. On Juliana see Pro Obitu de St. Juliana, pp. 66, 68.


Martyrdom in Late Medieval Europe

On the first day of June 1310 a fire burnt in the Place de Grève, in Paris. There Marguerite Porete, a Beghine of Hainaut, was executed for her teachings. Already around 1295 she had been brought to the episcopal court of the Valenciennes, in front of Bishop Guy II of Cambrai, to answer accusations of heresy related to the teachings of a book which she had written and had circulated. This book was the Mirouer des simples ames anciennes et qui seulment demourent en vouloir et desir d'amour. The book was written in vernacular French of a decided antiquity and northern dialect. The work was condemned by the Bishop, and Marguerite was warned not to disseminate it any more, or risk being ‘relaxed’ to the secular arm. But Marguerite persisted, and acted not only in her natal Hainaut, but sent a copy of her book to Bishop Jean de Châlons-sur-Marne, and spread her teachings to simple people, Beguines and Beghards. She was called in front of the new Bishop of Cambrai, Philip of Marigny, and the Inquisitor of Hainaut, and was sent south to Paris for more searching examination. There she entered the custody of the Dominican Inquisitor William Humbert, who had his hands full with the trial of the Templars just then, but with the spread of the written vernacular, such challenges could become especially threatening, and the attempts to extirpate adherence often ended in the creation of what I would call martyrs, the true children of Christ. Martyrs were made in late medieval Europe, bodies burnt. Let us meet some of these martyrs.

But if we are truly to appreciate the context of belief, death, and witness in the later Middle Ages, then this is not ridiculous, and we must relativize the notion of faith, because issues of truth and faith were contested in these centuries as never before. Not only the question of authority, but the whole thrust of Christian history was being increasingly questioned as apocalyptic interpretations of the course of world events took root from the late twelfth century. Such views came to engulf not only sections of the Franciscan Order, but attracted an eminent physician, diplomat, astrologer, and theologian such as Arnold of Villanova, and tertiaries and lay people all over northern Italy, southern France, the Rhineland, the Low Countries, and Catalonia. Additionally, forms of perfection through poverty and through retiring contemplation were creating a series of alternatives to parochial practice, to family life, to the ordered acceptance of scholarly written authority, evading the ever-longer arms of Church and State. With the spread of the written vernacular, such challenges could become especially threatening, and the attempts to extirpate adherence often ended in the creation of what I would call martyrs, the true children of Christ. Martyrs were made in late medieval Europe, bodies burnt. Let us meet some of these martyrs.

**Legit . . . quod factus est obedientia usque ad mortem.** Unde pater quod martyrium secundum se est perfectius quam obedientia absoluta dicta. 44

Anticipating the relativizing possibility inherent in his words, Aquinas examines a variety of various deaths, such as that of a woman who dies to preserve her chastity, but concludes that the martyr must indeed be dying for faith, not for any other worldly truth, otherwise there may well be martyrs for geometry!

Alioquin si quis moreretur pro confessione veritatis geometriae, vel alterius scientiae speculativa, esse martyr: quod videtur ridiculum. 45

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Dieu par nature divino , et ceste Amo est par droicuere d'amour. Si que ceste pre-iieuse amye de moy est aprines et mene de moy sans elle, cat elle est mue en moy, et telle fin, dit Amour, prent ma norriure.53

This process of ongoing rapprochement with God which is earned at the cost of losing human attributes, is the problematical dilemma posed by Marguerite. For in her formulations she has no space and no time for those mundane virtues which keep human society in place. Early in her work Soul proclaims:

L'AMO. Je le vous confesse, dit ceste Amo, dame Amour; ung temps fut que je y estoie, mais ores en est

It was such exultant declarations which were to draw the attention of inquisitors and examiners throughout the later Middle Ages, when dealing with those religious sects which they saw as libertine, and lawless. Marguerite was, of course, neither. Indeed, as opposed to those accusations levelled at other religious women, and very frequently at the Beguines, not a single accusation of unruliness or incontinence in living was levelled against her.

Marguerite's challenge was not only a plan for individual spiritual progression which anticipated a stage in which it broke off from the gravitational forces of human society and religious organization, it was also an explicit engagement with the very utility of the remedies, sacraments, channels of mediation offered by the Church. Her imagining of a stage in which a human needed no longer the help of these procedures offered by the Church came close to challenging the basic tenet of salvation through ecclesiastical adherence and practice alone. Because her soul needed none of these any longer to secure unity with God:

Ceste, qui telle est, ne quiert plus Dieu par penitence ne par sacrerent ment nul de Sainte Eglise, ne par pensees ne par paroles ne par creature d'ycy bas ne par creature de lassus ...

53 Le Mirouer, c.8, lines 41-9, p. 82.

Marguerite also deploys the language of romantic longing powerfully, drawing on a language which Beguine writers had made their own, in describing her love of God. She uses the expectation of jealousy implicit in themes of truth. She did not write in Latin in the intimacy of a religious house; she was suffused with literature and possessed eloquence which she deployed without apology—she took on the world.

A male adherent followed Marguerite, one Guiard of Cressonessacq (of the Beauvaisis), who claimed to be the Angel of Philadelphia of the Apocalypse, in an idiom of millenarianism which had become aligned with that of religious poverty. As the guardian angel of the Church of Philadelphia, a church of the elect before the coming of the third and final age, he espoused Marguerite, yet it is not clear when they met, whether already in the north, or only in Paris. In the very collection which contains the transcripts of Marguerite's trial proceedings we also find accounts of Guiard's examination on the very same days. For defending Marguerite's view he was also tried (unlike Marguerite, he was interrogated), condemned, and relaxed to the secular authorities for execution. At the eleventh hour Guiard chose to save his skin, and exchanged the chance of becoming a 'martyr' for a life in the royal prison, and Marguerite was burnt without him. 61

Unlike Hildegard of Bingen, who claimed she was merely an unlearned woman ordered by God to write down her visions, the 'infilling of her reason', 62 or Bridget of Sweden, who claimed that God had said to her 'I am your God ... you will be my channel. 63 Marguerite does not timidly insist on her unworthiness, or her vessel-like function in conveying divine words of wisdom. Marguerite speaks what she knows to be true—the only truth. She did not write in Latin in the intimacy of a religious house; Marguerite wrote to be read, or rather read out, and heard and followed. She was suffused with literature and possessed eloquence which she deployed without apology—she took on the world.

So there were certain beliefs which could win one a martyr's death quite predictably, if they were frequently voiced and steadfastly held. In the fifteenth century eucharistic error and its concomitant implications as a critique of sacerdotal efficacy was one such belief. It was thought to have been pronounced by John Hus, together with positions that offended the whole sacerdotal edifice, many of them taken to be Wycliffite error. Hus was condemned to the flames by the Council of Constance, a body he had come to meet with hopes of compromise and reconciliation (plate 1). Five years earlier such error spoken, in a far more direct and startling form, led to the burning of the craftsman John Badby at Smithfield, in the presence of the great prelates and magnates of England. Now John Badby had argued consistently, first in 1409 to Thomas Peveril, Bishop of Worcester, and then, in 1410, at Blackfriars, in London, a simple but consistent
position concerning the Eucharist: that material bread remained on the altar after the words of consecration, that he would not believe that Christ's Body was present until he saw it in the hands of a priest, and that Christ could not have given his own Body to his disciples while still present at the Last Supper. He also claimed that any person had as much authority as a priest to perform the eucharistic miracle; echoing an even stronger Lollard claim, that any good man is better than a bad priest. Arguing so simply, with no subtilitas, he left no room for compromise or evasive formulation. So, facing both archbishops, many bishops, the Chancellor of the realm, Edward, Duke of York, he repeated his opinions at another session, at St Paul's on 4 March 1410; the chroniclers describe a horrible spider coming out of his mouth as he spoke. Once his sentence was announced a royal writ for his burning was very quickly issued. The mood was ripe for the execution of a Lollard, for the making of an example to deter and instil fear, and one of the few English Lollard martyrs was made.62

But in a bizarre improvisation on the narrative moment in a passio, when offers are made to the martyr in an attempt to persuade him or her to recant and be saved, the Prince of Wales, faggots already burning under Badby, had him removed from the barrel which encased him, and approached him with an offer of a royal pension (£d. a day) if he were to give up the foolishness of his error. But even though he had already smelt the smoke, heard the crackling of twigs, and felt the terrifying heat rising all around him, Badby refused. He was to be executed, as the assembled grandees wished him to be, but also as he wished to be; he must have been sure of his place in heaven, in the company of martyrs of old.63

In the very same fire that burnt Marguerite in Paris on that spring day of 1312 another person was put to death, a relapsed convert from Judaism. We know little of this man, except that he had begun to blaspheme against the Virgin in public, begging the attentions of neighbours and authorities, and ultimately the fire: ‘Eodem die [cum] quidam de Judaeismo dudum ad fidem conversus, iterum sicut canis as vomitum conversus... ibidem incendio concenmus.’ Suicidal? lunatic? irresponsible seeker of notoriety? We cannot know. But this Jew was an heir to a robust tradition of active martyrdom which moved and inspired medieval Jews, and sometimes drew admiration as well as horror from their Christian beholders. Fed on the ancient traditions of Jewish martyrdom at the hand of the Romans, and on even earlier myths, like those of the death of the Maccabees, and Hanna and her seven sons during the period of Seleucid rule, Jewish martyrdom drew immediacy and a host of new models from the events which took shape in the Rhineland in and around 1096, and which recurred throughout the later Middle Ages.64 The ideal was to sanctify God's name, and never to deny or shame it by accepting baptism. Whereas an earlier halachic tradition recommended only a lenient duty of martyrdom, one which was to be confined to public confrontations, and which exempted women and children, the new Ashkenazi, Franco-German communities, those who bore the crusading massacres and the brunt of ritual murder pogroms, were more radical and defiant in their

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63 ‘Continuatio Chronici Guillelmi de Nangiaci’, p. 601.
64 B. Chazan, European Jewry and the First Crusade (Berkeley, CA, 1987).
scripta

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apparuerunt magna luminaria super eis et fecerant miracula et virtutes.

Their remains were collected and venerated, as by Beatrice Bocadiferro, who admitted in a trial of 1307 that she had relics: bones, hair, body parts solidified in the fire, which she kept in silken and precious cloths and covered with glass, relics which she honoured, "flessis genibus, habens spem et fiduciam in eis ..." When confronted by their inquisitors, some ans"es improvised on a phrase from the Sermon on the Mount, asserting that credentes and apostolic martyrs "will inherit the earth ..." So the persecuted sects of the Alps, of northern Italy and southern France, Cathars, Apostolics, and Waldensians, were sustained by practices and aspirations whose use by orthodox Christians drew criticism and ridicule. But theirs were, of course, the true martyrs. The contestation over the honour of the name is reflected in the inquisitorial investigation of some Piemontese Waldensians. Among the erroneous opinions attributed to a smith of Caramagnola in 1397: de glorio suo beato Petro martire dixit quod fuit malus et peccator et non sanctus, et est damnatus in inferno, quia persequebatur servos Christi, dicendo hereticos et Valdenses, a quibus fuit interfectus dictus sanctus Petrus, esse servos Christi et quod molis fuit precator coram Deo quam mortem besti Petri martyris.

The making of martyrs, and the degrading of the martyrs of others, sustained identities; and it was a war of worlds, of cosmic pictures, unbridgeable, leading to the ongoing desire and need for new martyrs.

All this forces us to appreciate the variety of adherences and affinities for which people could live and die in the later Middle Ages, and the ways in which martyrdom came to embody the ultimate sanction of love and truth, then we need not be surprised to find it affirming and sustaining such persecuted groups and individuals of late medieval society. Not even those groups whose critique of the Church was grounded in an abhorrence of material practices such as pilgrimage and the cult of saints' relics, not even the dualist Cathars and the anti-clerical Waldensians, failed to develop a nurturing cult of their own martyrs. Depositions collected by the inquisitors of Bologna, which dealt with northern Italian Apostles between 1295 and 1307, mention beliefs such as 'Dolcino was saved, and a saint in heaven'; 'Ugolina ... who was burnt and dead for the same heresy, was a good and holy woman', 'Rolandinus de Ois, condemned for heresy, was in paradise and prayed for her.' These martyrs were even believed to work miracles for the surviving credentes:

dicebat quod heretici faciebant virtutes et miracula, et ... dixit quod audiret quod Manme fuerant combisti quidam heretici et

notion of martyrdom. Theirs was vibrant and collective action; it stressed the reward awaiting the martyrs, and interacted with the enthusiasm of crusading itself and with the fervour of Christian religious practices and polemic encounters. Jewish communities first tried to avert an approaching catastrophe, they pleaded with rulers, tried to bribe leaders of mobs, prayed and fasted, but when it became clear that destruction was nigh, this was faced by many in a frenzy of delight: as fathers killed their children, husbands their wives. This is the terrible martyrdom which gives identity, which marks one group clearly apart from the other, one which turns adversity to hilarity, suiting to the promise of infinite reward. Some Jews pretended to accept baptism only to gain access to a crucifix or baptismal water and shout profanities before their death. These actions were recounted by amazed Christian observers and writers like Albert of Aachen a decade after the crusade pogroms, but was also enshrined in the genre of Jewish lament, a sadly abundant literary product of medieval Jewish experience. Martyrdom was meant not only to sustain the identity of individual and community in refusal of conversion, even at the moment of death, and nurture future generations, it was a belligerent act against the enemy, the Christians, who would no longer be able to torment a person who had turned into a martyr.

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which value is so often earned at the cost of life. The mark of martyrdom, so great a privilege, so binding an act, left to its beholders and lovers so great a store of memory, so strong a sense of cohesion, so inspiring an example; it was a gift of love, and with love martyrs were remembered in the medieval Jewish communities, in the readings on feast days in churches, in the collective memory of Waldensian families, in the moving verses of Jewish poets. Their love and their laments draw us into the terrible logic of martyrdom, the aestheticization of death and torment, the belief that some deaths are celebrations. In this, the raw convergence of Love and Death—Eros and Thanatos—is the terrible claim that death is the utmost exploration of pleasure, and the truest token of love.

William Blake, that extraordinary Christian, tested the necessary bond between death and love in the words he put into Jesus' mouth in the Via Crucis section of Jerusalem:

Jesus said: 'wouldest thou love one who never died
For thee, or ever die for one who had not died for thee?
And if God dieth not for Man and giveth not himself
Eternally for Man, Man could not exist; for Man is Love
As God is Love; every kindness to another is a little Death
In the Divine Image, nor can Man exist but by Brotherhood.'

In the Christian tale it was by his death that God had earned Man's love for him, the willingness to be martyred in turn for him; and here is encapsulated the logic of martyrdom, as lived and understood by so many in the late medieval centuries, as it is in the throes of ethnic and nationalist strife in today's Europe. That death creates a debt, and social relations are fed by such debts and sacrifices at all levels. Every giving is a taking away, a dispossession, which awaits a return, and these exchanges are love, not disinterested, but very interested, and thus densely binding. Because every martyr beckons another in death.

Those who did die for their faith, those who burned, and often with their infamous books, with the dignity extolled of old, the dignity and calm of the martyr-to-be, transcending the fear and the pain in the knowledge of truth and the expectation of divine recognition and recompense, were in the later medieval centuries not Christians tested for their faith, but those exactly who criticized, questioned, or indeed rejected that faith: mystics, Jews, heretics. The fires of religious indignation, as opposed to those of mere judicial disapproval, burnt for Marguerite Porete, for Jews who refused baptism or preferred to cut the throats of their children, and then their own, with knives ritually blessed, for the Cathars of Mont Segur; they burnt for Jan Hus, and for those who still insisted that the sacramental structure which worked spirit in matter, matter conceived by dualist critique as essentially corrupt and evil, could not hold. These are the late medieval martyrs, who provoked, cajoled, discussed, disputed, and then—when no accommodation could be found—burnt for their beliefs. It was this context of criticism and dissent which produced late medieval martyrs—not only the dissenting voices silenced by the flames, but sometimes bound up into the drama, death was also experienced by those who went out to argue with them, correct them.

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