

How martyrs are made: Stories of the faithful

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [July 29, 2008](#) issue

The fire made the likeness of a room, like the sail of a vessel filled with wind, and surrounded the body of the martyr as with a wall, and he was within it not as burning flesh, but as bread that is being baked, or as gold and silver being refined in a furnace. And we perceived such a fragrant smell as the scent of incense or other costly spices. —from *The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp* (second century).

One of the teenagers killed in Colorado's Columbine High School shootings in 1999 was Cassie Bernall. Soon after her murder, reports emerged about how one of the shooters had found Bernall under a table, pointed a gun at her head and asked, "Do you believe in God?" She said yes and was promptly shot.

Within weeks of that event I heard a sermon at an Episcopal church praising Bernall's witness and urging Christians to imitate her faithfulness. Prognosticators predicted another Great Awakening in American life sparked by Bernall's martyrdom. Billboards appeared that announced, "She Said Yes." Her mother penned a memoir using the phrase as its title, and a Web site started selling "She Said Yes" T-shirts and other merchandise.

There was one problem: the reported exchange between Bernall and her killer may never have happened. Students who were within earshot of the event disputed the account. One survivor claimed that she, not Bernall, had been the one questioned by the shooter. Those who made grand claims for Bernall started backpedaling. Some suggested that the story was important whatever the facts behind it. Elizabeth Castelli, who recounts this history in *Martyrdom and Memory*, points out that this latter rationalization was an odd one to come from Christians who also adhere to biblical literalism; they would never say the truth behind a biblical story is what counts, whether or not the event happened. Stories like Bernall's suggest some of the reasons to hesitate when confronted with claims to martyrdom.

Yet martyrs and appeals to martyrs cannot be ignored. Catholics commemorate martyrs regularly as part of their lectionary readings, and those who pray with monastic breviaries ask for the martyrs to pray for them. Mainline Christians are familiar with such contemporary martyrs as Martin Luther King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Oscar Romero, though they are much less comfortable with tales of classic martyrs, like Polycarp. (When I have used stories such as the one above about Polycarp in a sermon, my listeners have become confused and uncomfortable rather than stirred to imitate such heroic faith. Their faces say, "We're here for an edifying sermon and you're giving us gore?")

An emphasis on mission to a godless world keeps martyrdom, or the possibility of martyrdom, a major theme for evangelicals. *Touchstone* magazine has a regular section devoted to the topic. Organizations like The Voice of the Martyrs send out magazines, e-mail blasts, and a steady stream of speakers to local churches and radio stations to raise awareness of the number of contemporary Christian martyrs. They often cite data from the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, which forecasts that 175,000 Christians will be martyred worldwide in 2008. That's 480 per day.

Another oft-cited source is the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, produced by the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary outside Boston. It declares there have been some 70 million Christian martyrs in history, and more than 45 million in the 20th century. In evangelical circles one often hears the claim that there were more Christian martyrs in the 20th century than in all previous centuries combined.

These numbers deserve more scrutiny than can be offered here, but it should be noted that the *Encyclopedia* treats every victim of Stalin as a Christian martyr and says there were 1 million "Jewish Christian" martyrs in the Holocaust. It also gives some problematic data in listing causes of death: between 1,000 and 10,000 martyrs may have been "quartered," we are told; a similar number were "eaten by piranhas" and as many again "eaten alive." Between 10,000 and 100,000 (notice the broad range) have been "frightened to death," from 1 to 2 million "liquidated" and 4 to 10 million "lowered into sewage." Even more nonspecific: between 500,000 and 1 million were "wiped out."

That the data on martyrdom can be exaggerated does not mean that there are no real martyrs. In recent years, a number of Christian martyrs have made the news.

Newspapers covered the story of Gracia and Martin Burnham, Bible translators with an organization called New Tribes in the Philippines, who were kidnapped in May 2001 by Abu Sayyaf, a terrorist group aligned with al-Qaeda (see Eliza Griswold's brilliant profile of the Burnhams in the *New Republic*, June 4, 2007). While being held, the couple apparently treated their captors with sacrificial love. During a rescue effort, Filipino soldiers inadvertently killed Martin. After his death, applications to New Tribes soared. As Tertullian famously said, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church—or, nowadays, of the mission agency.

Tom Fox was among four members of a Christian Peacemaker Team kidnapped in Iraq in November 2005. CPT seeks to be a nonviolent presence in global troublespots so as to forestall military action. Fox's teammate James Loney wrote about the CPT story in the *Century* (July 24, 2007) and elsewhere, describing how the hostages cared for their captors, counseled them against becoming suicide bombers, gave them back rubs and embodied the peace they preached. Fox was separated from the group and murdered in March 2006.

In May 2007 three Christians were murdered in the southeastern province of Malatya in Turkey. A German missionary, Tilmann Geske, and two Turkish converts, Necati Aydin and Ugur Yuksel, had been led to believe that some Muslim men were considering converting to Christianity. Instead, the Christians were tied up and stabbed. One perpetrator told police that he hoped to give "a lesson to the enemies of religion." A mission agency in Turkey was subsequently accused of embellishing the details of the murders as part of its appeal for donations.

In July 2007 a short-term mission team from South Korea was kidnapped in Afghanistan and two members of the group were killed before the South Korean government apparently paid a ransom to the Taliban for the release of the rest. South Korea announced that it would allow no more missionaries to Afghanistan, and Pastor Park Eun-jo of Saemmul Church, which sent the team, apologized to South Koreans for bringing shame to the nation.

Stories of recent martyrs could easily be multiplied: monks were murdered in Algeria in 1998; an American nun was shot defending peasants' claim to land in Brazil in 2005; Baptist missionaries from the U.S. were shot in northern Iraq last year, and so on. But a glimpse of these stories is enough to show the complexities of martyrdom: each of the stories is embedded in a particular political situation and so can be interpreted in various ways—with the victims as foolish or heroic, naive or

courageous. The stories can easily be turned toward demonizing Muslims or supporting (or opposing) U.S. foreign policy, and can be dramatized for fund-raising purposes. And we'd need a lot more of them to add up to 480 per day.

Much of the recent theological reflection on martyrdom has come from thinkers in the Anabaptist tradition—not surprising, perhaps, since that church's historic refusal to use violence often resulted in Anabaptists being targets of violence. Generations of Anabaptists were raised in homes where a copy of *Martyrs Mirror* sat alongside the family Bible. That weighty tome tells the stories of martyrs, beginning with Jesus and the apostles, with special attention to the persecution and execution of Anabaptists in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. The book includes the famous story of Dirk Willems, an Anabaptist captured by Spanish inquisitors in Holland, who escaped from jail and was pursued across a frozen pond. When a pursuer fell through the ice, Willems returned to save the man, even though the act guaranteed his own death at the stake. Such stories and the practice of reading them are powerful shapers of community identity and individual imagination.

In *To Share in the Body: A Theology of Martyrdom for Today's Church* (Brazos), Craig Hovey, a Mennonite theologian trained at Fuller and Cambridge, argues that Christianity is a training for martyrdom. Martyrdom is not a tragic mistake, nor is it a historical relic from a bygone age. It is “a gift of God to the church.” Christians cannot and should not hope for martyrdom, but they must be prepared for it.

Hovey argues against any utilitarian reading of the martyrs. Martyrdom makes no argument. Martyrs should not be used to argue that someone else's religion is bad or that some other country deserves retribution. In the New Testament “martyrs do not die because they fight for what is right, but precisely because they refuse to fight for what is true.” (Interestingly, even crusading Christians have been hesitant to call soldiers killed in battle martyrs.) Martyrdom is, literally, good for nothing. It is a gift of God in which we see the highest instance of a person bearing witness to the truth. Martyrdom is “the shape of the good news for those who would take up crosses and follow Jesus.” This is why in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus promises the disciples that the Spirit will tell them what to say when they are accused (13:11). The final words of the accused, presumably words of forgiveness and witness to the gospel, are also gifts. And sure enough, the church through the centuries has received their words and stories and is strengthened through them to act faithfully.

Another Mennonite, Tripp York, attends to theologies of martyrdom throughout church history in *The Purple Crown: The Politics of Martyrdom* (Herald). He asks American Christians a challenging question, “Why has the church in North America produced so few martyrs?” For York, American churches produce few martyrs because its members are so willing to do violence when the state asks them to.

York, who teaches at Elon University, is keen to avoid any description of martyrdom as a tragedy or a sacrifice. On the contrary, martyrdom is “rhetoric,” an argument for the existence of God. The martyr gives witness not to an alternative world but to this world restored: “an authentic one: a world inaugurated by the cross and the empty tomb.” Martyrdom is also a gift to the enemy—a firsthand re-presentation of Jesus’ response to his killers. Jesus’ resurrection keeps us from being able to call his death a sacrifice or a tragedy, and the martyr’s vindication will do the same for the martyr.

One problem with extolling martyrs is that often Christians remember martyrs who were killed by other Christians: remembrance of the martyrs is thereby tied to a judgment on other Christian traditions. That’s how *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, produced in 16th-century England, fostered anti-Catholicism in English-speaking Protestants. Hugh Latimer famously reassured his companion at the stake, “Play the man, Master Ridley; we shall this day light such a candle, by God’s grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.” The theological problem: it was Catholics under Queen Mary lighting the torch. Mutual recriminations were common in Lutheran, Reformed and Catholic controversies on the Continent as well. Reformers and counterreformers spit at one another. St. Augustine’s aphorism that the cause, not the punishment, makes the martyr.

Pope John Paul II may have pointed the way toward an ecumenical approach to martyrdom when he recognized both Protestants and Catholics as martyrs in Uganda, where they were killed by the Bagandan kabaka (king) for converting to Christianity. Timothy Furry, writing in the journal *New Blackfriars*, observes that John Paul’s willingness to adopt a “posture of repentance” for Catholic misdeeds toward Protestants makes this mutual recognition coherent. (Full repentance was a step too far, observes Furry.) In the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, the pope offered a vision of how the recognition of martyrs may be an ecumenical help rather than hindrance: “Believers in Christ, united in following in the footsteps of the martyrs, cannot remain divided. If they wish truly and effectively to oppose the world’s tendency to reduce to powerlessness the Mystery of Redemption, they must profess together the

truth about the Cross.” This is an enormous step for a pope to take, and if the leader of the world’s Catholics can take it, surely Protestants can acknowledge their own sins and the fact that Catholics have been martyred at the hands of Protestants.

Martyrdom has an especially uncertain place in a world defined by political liberalism. In the standard account of the rise of modernity, the wars of religion in the 17th century horrified Europe and convinced leaders of church and state alike that secular governments, not churches, should rule and that different faiths should be tolerated. When all religions are tolerated, no believers need die for their faith. This explains why the church in the U.S. has produced few martyrs. It also explains why in America appeals like Hovey’s or York’s to the exemplary nature of the martyrs don’t make immediate sense; in most people’s minds, the only people who die for their faith are delusional and suicidal figures like Jim Jones, founder of the People’s Temple, and more than 900 of his followers. (Hovey and York would counter that a widespread adoption of nonviolence would quickly make people view Christians as dangerous or treasonous.)

Discussions of martyrdom today cannot be conducted without reference to Muslim suicide bombers. Talal Asad, an anthropologist at the City University of New York, explores Western reactions to this phenomenon in *On Suicide Bombing* (Columbia University Press). Why, he asks, should suicide bombers evoke more horror than, say, the soldiers who drop cluster bombs in Afghanistan or fire cruise missiles? The difference, he says, is the suicide bomber’s motive, which Westerners take to be the absurd one of doing violence specifically for one’s faith. Suicide bombers also take violence into their own hands rather than leaving it in the hands of the secular state—another infringement of political liberalism. Americans love the concept of self-sacrifice when applied to U.S. soldiers, he points out, and are not at all unwilling to die for American civil religion.

Asad makes the mistake of conflating Jesus’ crucifixion with suicide. That mistake, and the justified horror at terrorists’ praise of murder-martyrdom, shows just how important it is for Christian communities to be clear on what counts as martyrdom. Jesus’ death is a gift of himself for the benefit even of those who murdered him. Nevertheless, Asad’s patient investigation of claims to martyrdom in his own Muslim tradition can model how Christians should debate claims to martyrdom within their tradition.

Chris Huebner, another Mennonite theologian (he teaches at Canadian Mennonite University), argues in *A Precarious Peace* (Herald) that the ambiguity that surrounds claims to martyrdom is all to the good. The truth about martyrs is always something a community must pursue, without claiming to capture or possess it. In fact, arguing about martyrdom is part of the church's growth in holiness. Martyrdom is a "work of memory"—no one can declare herself a martyr, only the community can. "The very designation of martyrdom is a fragile and tenuous one, existing . . . between the twin extremes of suicide and victimhood." Huebner grants to Elizabeth Castelli the point that remembrances of martyrs are always constructs, never able securely to capture truth.

Yet this postmodern claim is not enough to fully capture a theological account of martyrdom. For, Huebner writes, "without such images as the triumph of the lamb and the heavenly banquet, along with the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity that give them a kind of material display, [the deaths of martyrs] are reduced to a crude occurrence of meaningless suffering, or at most a form of masochism." Martyrdom is an eschatological claim about ultimate meaning.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams is one non-Mennonite theologian who also sees martyrdom as central in church history (see his *Why Study the Past?* [Eerdmans]). Williams thinks that the most distinctive genre of early Christianity is the martyrdom narrative. Stories of Perpetua and Felicity being thrown to the lions and guiding the frightened centurion's sword to their throats while forgiving him are "the simplest possible demonstration of what 'church' means—and so of what holy power looks like and what is involved in claiming a different sort of citizenship."

That last point is key. Martyrs are those who do not fail to be faithful when the world revolts against Christian claims. They are much like the monks and nuns who head to the desert or promise to be celibate in the midst of the world—they announce a new world coming in the midst of this present, illegitimate one.

For Williams, Christian doctrine is an exegesis of martyrdom. Innovations proposed in the church should be judged on whether they accord with the martyrs' claim to "independent citizenship." Yet enthusiasm for martyrdom should never tip over into disparagement of God's created order. Theology must both "justify the witness of the martyr" and make it clear that the gospel is about the "transfiguration of *this* world."

Martyrs make no argument, but they do tell a sort of truth: that there is something worth dying for. Other institutions are not hesitant to ask for our lives. The corporation, the university, the army, the market all make claims to our ultimate allegiance. Christian faith should make no less bold a claim. Without the martyrs the church would forget that.

And yet we are right to exercise discernment when remembering the martyrs. Memories that produce more violence are better forgotten. We should argue through the ambiguity of claims to martyrdom and refuse to let deaths be co-opted by false memories or ideologies or turned to calls for revenge. Prayer is an appropriate response to martyrdom; we can pray for those in harm's way because of their faith and ask to share in the faith of those who face adversity with courage. In that way martyrdom can be the form of the Christian life.