

Justin Martyr and W. E. B. Du Bois on violent persecution

By [John D. Wilsey](#)

June 23, 2015

Helpful articles addressing the terrorist attack at Emanuel AME Church last week have [appeared](#) in a number of [outlets](#), some [offering](#) superb [analysis](#).

One question concerning the context of violence in church in particular, and persecution in general, is what commonalities exist between the experiences of persecuted groups—namely Christians on the basis of their faith and African Americans on the basis of their race. And are there any commonalities in the ways these groups have responded to the violence perpetrated against them?

This is a complicated question. African Americans have often been persecuted because of both their race and their Christian confession. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between these two triggers of violence. (See Carl Chinn's [statistical analysis](#) of church violence in America since 1999.)

Still, since Chinn [states](#) that there have been 971 incidents of church violence since January 1, 1999, it seems that we could learn something from the way those suffering from persecution have responded. Perhaps there is a responsible and Christian model for civic engagement in the face of violent persecution.

Two representative thinkers are Justin Martyr (ca. 114–165), a second-century Christian apologist, and W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), a brilliant African American historian, philosopher, literary figure, and activist. Both represented persecuted minority groups. Both experienced persecution. And both thinkers addressed the parties persecuting them, appealing to them for justice on the basis of human dignity and mutual benefit. Their appeal for justice in the midst of persecution continues to be potent today for every person or group facing persecution.

Justin wrote his *First Apology* to the Roman emperor Antoninus Pius. In this letter, he pleaded for justice for Christians who were being persecuted solely on the basis of their faith. If you are going to judge us, he said, then do so on the basis of whether or not we have acted wickedly, not simply because we carry the name of “Christian.” Christians, Justin said, are the most loyal of the emperor’s subjects,

committed to truth, compassion, and civic duty. What benefit could Rome gain for persecuting its most loyal subjects?

And what was the basis for Christians' loyalty to the state? Justin told the emperor that Christians' devotion to Rome was informed by their belief in the righteousness of God. Christians, Justin wrote, look to a heavenly kingdom where they will be in the presence of the holy God forever. They seek to render to God and Caesar appropriately, recognizing that communal justice is found in the balanced rendering of loyalty.

In similar spirit, Du Bois appealed to the highest authority in seeking justice for African Americans chafing under the official persecution of Jim Crow. In March 1913, Du Bois penned "An Open Letter to Woodrow Wilson" on behalf of *The Crisis*, the NAACP's journal, that contained an eloquent appeal to justice for ten percent of the American population. He wrote,

We want to be treated as men. We want to vote. We want our children educated. We want lynching stopped. We want no longer to be herded as cattle on street cars and railroads. We want the right to earn a living, to own our own property and to spend our income unhindered and uncursed. . . . In the name of that common country for which your fathers and ours have bled and toiled, be not untrue, President Wilson, to the highest ideals of American democracy.

Six months later, when it became clear that Wilson was doing nothing to advance justice for African Americans, Du Bois wrote "Another Open Letter to Wilson," expressing his faith in Wilson that "he is too honest and cultured a gentleman to yield to the clamors of ignorance and prejudice and hatred." But despite Du Bois's pleas on behalf of his people, Wilson was not disposed to see things aright.

Both Justin and Du Bois—while they are separated by a great gulf of time, experience, and culture—appealed to their persecutors from the unassailable position of being on the side of right. They weren't making their appeals by addressing their own people, throwing out verbal red meat like demagogues. Their courage in the cause of peace and common human flourishing went as far as confronting the ones holding the swords. And in fact, that is what we saw in the [response](#) of the Charlestonian African American Christians as they faced the murderer at his bond hearing. Their words to the murderer were "[testaments to a](#)

[faith that is not compromised by violence or grief.](#)”

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