

*The Myth of Persecution*, by Candida Moss

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## In Review



*The*  
**MYTH**  
*of*  
**Persecution**

HOW EARLY CHRISTIANS INVENTED  
A STORY OF MARTYRDOM

Candida Moss

### **The Myth of Persecution**

by Candida Moss

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Candida Moss unravels a common misperception: that Christianity faced murderous government-sanctioned persecution for its first three centuries, a period in which “the blood of the martyrs” supplied seed for the growing church. Grounded in ten

years of research on martyr traditions, Moss's basic position will surprise few historians. Though early Christian texts assign martyrdom a constitutive role in the church's story, non-Christian sources refuse to corroborate this picture.

But beyond this common observation, Moss has much more to say: early Christians rarely experienced the sort of suppression we have imagined. Even our most reliable martyrdom stories, which Christian authors deployed in the service of various later causes, betray significant degrees of elaboration and anachronism. And many of the martyrdom accounts amount to pure, albeit pious, fiction.

Like the ancient poets, Moss at once instructs and entertains. Admirably weaving clear argumentation into vivid narration and demonstrating authoritative command of the primary sources, Moss advances her case by means of several important arguments. She also transgresses the boundary between historian and theologian and calls the church to repentance. She contends that the martyrdom narrative poses grave dangers, having contributed to everything from mild alienation to outright atrocity throughout the church's history.

Moss requires readers to accept two major qualifications. First, we need a precise definition of martyrdom. Vague harassment, however annoying or hostile, hardly counts. Nor does death by suicide or in combat. Even when Christians die as a result of their convictions, it counts as martyrdom only when the killers are motivated to crush or punish Christian belief. In this sense Oscar Romero is not a martyr. His Christian vocation surely led to his death, but his assassination was more political than religious. Second, though Moss does not deny that quite a few early Christians suffered martyrdom, her interest lies in official, state-sponsored suppression of Christianity, a condition she identifies on only a few occasions in ancient history, none of which continued for a long period of time.

A certain relentlessness characterizes Moss's presentation. She begins by dismantling romantic assumptions about Christian martyrs. Yes, Christians were the first to employ the Greek word *martys* to denote those who are killed for their faith. But no, Christians were not the first martyrs. With precision Moss shows how early Christian accounts of martyrdom drew on antecedents in Greco-Roman and Jewish literature. Socrates and the Maccabean martyrs, among others, provided models for many Christian martyrdom narratives.

Moss then turns to the Christian martyr accounts themselves. Her longest chapter amounts to a thorough unraveling of the martyrdom myth. Turning from one example to another, she unpeels layers of conventional plot devices, historical anachronisms and legal impossibilities. Some plot developments are “Christian equivalents of a heroine opening the basement door in a horror movie.”

Moss identifies only six “authentic” martyrdom accounts from the earliest church, and it turns out that even these narratives “have been edited and shaped by later generations of Christians,” for a variety of ends. Typically they reflect doctrinal or ecclesial controversies that preoccupied Christians centuries after the deaths of their subjects. Hundreds of other martyrdom narratives boil down to pure fiction.

If the martyrdom accounts pose historical problems, what about the big picture? Should we imagine ancient “Christians huddled together in catacombs . . . and living in fear”? Not often, says Moss. She identifies four periods in which the Roman government sought and killed Christians: Nero’s persecution in 64, the Decian persecution of 250, a brief persecution under Valerian in 257–258 and the “Great Persecutions” of 303–305 and 311–313. Not only do these add up to a relatively brief period of time, some of the events were regional in effect, and not all of them qualify precisely as persecutions.

For example, ancient Christians surely regarded Decius as evil, but his edict that all persons must sacrifice to the genius of the emperor aimed to solidify a shaky political situation rather than target Christians as Christians. Moreover, the accounts of these persecutions often indicate the high social status of the martyrs, status that could not have been achieved in a context defined by ongoing, violent repression.

On this point Moss walks a fine line, perhaps opening herself to criticism. She recognizes that even the earliest Christian literature reflects intense concern with persecution. She acknowledges that we need not regard the authors of Revelation and 1 Peter as hysterical in their concern with persecution and agrees that some Christians died gruesome deaths. But she points out that these testimonies “do not line up with either the mythology of Christian persecution or modern definitions of persecution in which persecution is centralized or state-led.” Nor may we trust the protests of Justin Martyr, Tertullian and Eusebius that Christians were “everywhere and always persecuted, when, in fact, they were not.”

At this point one wonders whether Moss has so defined martyrdom and persecution as to render her findings inevitable. Those of us who specialize in the earliest Christian documents acknowledge that we lack objective evidence to confirm widespread official persecution. We also observe the ubiquity of persecution anxiety from the Gospels to Paul to Peter to Revelation to *Hermas* to the *Ascension of Isaiah* to the *Apocalypse of Peter*.

Let us concede that just a few instances of repression and only a very few martyrdoms are necessary to create a culture of fear and resentment. Nevertheless, Moss's choice to speak only of official persecution diverts us from considering the kinds of local, sporadic and unofficial persecution our most ancient texts suggest. I am eager to hear her assessment of this problem.

Moss acknowledges the presence of widespread hostility toward Christians in antiquity, but Christians were not the only group that faced occasional repression. By and large, the Romans were interested not in Christian religion but in loyalty. On the one hand, Christians did not support the religious economy through which people curried favor with the gods; on the other hand, Christians' refusal to honor the emperor smacked of sedition. Christians also formed suspiciously close communities. In Roman courts their conduct came across as disrespectful and rude. Moss correctly assesses the situation: "The Romans rarely persecuted Christians, and when they did, they had logical reasons that made sense to any ancient Roman."

As Moss wraps up her case, she examines the motives of Christian martyrs and of those who told their stories. The picture is not particularly flattering. We commonly imagine Christians facing arrest, then bravely enduring torture for the sake of their testimony. But what about those who volunteered for death, perhaps because they were suicidal? What about those who regarded their testimony as a weapon against their persecutors, or those who anticipated the day in which they would watch their tormentors endure divine wrath? How noble is a person who dies in search of a great heavenly reward?

As for the storytellers, martyrdom stories flourished not when persecution raged but during periods of relative peace. The accounts fill the martyrs' mouths with praise for the bishops and invective against heretics. They use the martyrs' stories to promote shrines and cities. "We are teetering precariously," Moss alerts us, "on the cusp of crude plagiarism and fanciful invention."

Moss concludes in the voice of a pastoral theologian. The martyrdom accounts may inculcate certain virtues, but they also bear a dangerous legacy. These stories set “us” Christians against the world, and they align the world with Satan. To the degree that the martyrdom myth shapes Christian imagination, it requires no great rhetorical leap to label theological, religious and political opponents in demonic terms. Martyrs were soldiers for Christ; they died not because they were pacifists but because they lacked real weapons. With real weapons in their hands, martyr-inspired Christians turn into merciless killers.

At a minimum, the martyrdom myth encourages true believers to dismiss their opponents and their opponents’ humanity, creating obstacles to understanding, compromise and common endeavor. Here historiography meets real life, as Moss’s exposure of the martyrdom myth opens a path to a new way of seeing the world and our neighbors.