THE BLOOD of MARTYRS
UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF ANCIENT VIOLENCE

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To Kaidyn Peter Hillesheim
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This book represents more than twenty-five years of thinking, teaching, and writing about these early centuries of Christianity. Over the years, I have been repeatedly surprised at how many of our beliefs—and indeed simple habits of mind—were formed during the turbulent first four centuries of the Christian era, and as I’ve studied these ideas, I have many times come back to the martyrs who figured so prominently in the struggle of the nascent church. Here, I have taken the opportunity to present my reflections on the roots of many of our ideas.

With so many years of gestation, my list of indebtedness is impossibly long. I owe thanks to scholars as far back as my graduate studies at Rutgers University, where Professor Traian Stoianovich taught me to overlook nothing in the search for the mentalities of the past, and Professors Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell introduced me to the study of saints. Later, Professor Jane Tibbits Schulenburg offered unflagging support and intellectual stimulation, and recently Professor Tracy Luchetta contributed her expertise in clinical psychology in helping me understand more about torture and suicide.

Beyond these, my ideas have been shaped by many colleagues who commented on my papers at scholarly conferences on two continents, and others nearby like David Borgmeyer whose expertise in theology and excellent editorial eye were very helpful. I also have to thank a generation of students in my classes, whose questions forced me to find some answers and to develop new ideas. Paula Rentmeester provided invaluable research help in locating and obtaining the rights to the illustrations. Finally, like all medieval scholars, I have to recognize the importance of librarians all over the world who (like ancient monks and nuns) preserve the precious texts that make all this possible.

The dedication is to my new grandson, Kaidyn, who was born as I was finishing this book. I fondly dedicate it to him in the hopes that he can grow up in a world where ideas develop with civil discourse instead of violence.
INTRODUCTION

“The Blood of Martyrs is the seed of Christians.” This widely quoted phrase (first written by the second-century church father Tertullian) claims that the death of each martyr stimulated the conversion of many more. In the first three centuries of Christianity, this was demonstrably true—people with little faith who were searching for spiritual truths believed that people willing to die horrible deaths must be on to something; Christians multiplied as the blood of martyrs was shed. To be fair, there were a lot of other reasons for the growth of Christianity during the Roman Empire, but that is another story.¹ In this book I look specifically at the influence of martyrdom before the fourth century when imperial decree formally ended the persecutions, and I show how the influence of the accounts of this ancient violence extended far beyond the creation of new converts.

This discussion also raises another question. How do people change their ideas? Humans are profoundly conservative when it comes to changing beliefs, and it often takes something like the dramatic witness of the martyrs to shift paradigms of thought. However, in a curious paradox, people of the ancient world also used the experience of the martyrs to maintain some old ideas—such as beliefs in magic and prophetic dreams. Thus, the blood of martyrs was an agent of change and continuity.

In the first section of this book, “The Power of the Martyrs,” I recognize the influence of the accounts of martyrs and explore some of the ideas developed in this formative age that continue to affect us today. In the first chapter I set the stage by recounting the history of the age of the martyrs. I describe the Roman Empire where this struggle took place and tell of the martyrs who died, the emperors who persecuted, and the motivations that launched the age of the martyrs. (In the appendix at the back of this book I provide a chart of all these participants.) In this chapter I also explore the nature of torture itself and what it does to the people who perform it and experience it. Finally, I show how this torture and persecution caused people to see the world as a struggle of good against evil that continues to haunt our cultural memories.

Subsequent chapters take on specific themes that I suggest were profoundly shaped by the accounts of the martyrs. I look at beliefs of immortality, magic, the association of martyrs with warfare, and dreams and visions. The experience of the martyrs also helped shape Western anti-Semitism as well as views of motherhood. This unlikely pairing has nothing in common except to demonstrate how little control we have over the consequences of dramatic acts. Finally, Section 1 ends with a chapter called “The Blood of Sacrifice,” which shows how (for better or worse) the very old idea of blood sacrifice entered into the Christian world.

In the second section of the book, “Controlling the Martyrs,” I demonstrate that even as early as the fourth century, Christian leaders recognized how influential martyrs were and how difficult it was to direct that influence. In one chapter I look at violence of Christians against Christians, as each side tried to claim the mantle of martyrdom. In another chapter I consider how accounts of martyrs’ deaths were changed for theological and political purposes; anything as powerful as martyrdom cannot help but be subject to

¹
propaganda. Finally, in the last chapter I show how fourth-century attempts to control martyrdom led to a prohibition of suicide that moved into modern laws. (Yes, physician-assisted suicide is banned because of the blood of martyrs.)

MEMORIES AND TEXTS

Before I begin the narrative, I must say something about our sources of information on martyrs, because what was most influential was not the death of any martyr but people’s recollection of the death. It is memory, not the past, that transforms the future, and memory was preserved in texts. Witnesses to a martyr’s death, or people who heard about a death, wrote down an account of it so survivors would not forget. Throughout this book, we shall see that the words they chose and the incidents they selected mattered more than the blood that was shed, so here I want to introduce the major texts that will appear and reappear throughout the book.

The earliest accounts of martyrs were preserved in correspondence written on scrolls, tucked in leather pouches, and circulated with Christians who traveled through the Roman Empire. Travelers stopped and read the accounts at churches, where the faithful made copies and continued to read them. It is impossible to overstate the significance of these texts; they were given as much respect as the letters of Paul, and since the canon of scripture had not yet been defined, many believed the words of the martyrs were messages from God.

Perhaps the most influential series of letters outside Scripture were written by Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch. Ignatius was arrested in about 107 and sent in chains to Rome to be martyred in the arena. As he journeyed from Antioch to Rome, he was greeted enthusiastically by the faithful along the way, and in response to their entreaties, he wrote many letters to those who watched with sadness as their beloved leader went calmly to his martyrdom. There are fifteen letters attributed to him, but probably only seven are authentic, and among them was a letter to a young bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, who later became a martyr in his own right.2

The second most influential account of a martyrdom was a letter telling of the death of Polycarp (Ignatius’s correspondent) who died as an old man in his eighties in 155. Ancient writers credited him with having studied with apostles who had known Jesus. Probably as a boy he had heard the preaching of the apostle John in Ephesus, and some traditions suggest that it was John himself who awarded the bishopric of Smyrna to Polycarp. The bishop served in Smyrna for nearly fifty years, and during that time, he gained a reputation for being an excellent pastor and a fierce guardian of orthodoxy. As subsequent churchmen struggled to establish uniform beliefs, the careful record of the orthodox bishop’s martyrdom remained popular and a prototype for many other accounts.3 A third early account was a letter written to Christians in modern Turkey relating in much detail the arrest and deaths of martyrs in Lyons (in modern France) in 177.4 All these letters establish a vocabulary and a way of understanding martyrdoms that would shape many of the future texts. Throughout this book I will draw from these rich and influential works to see how Christians in the future made sense of the martyrdoms of the past.

Beyond the influential letters, the accounts of the martyrs take two forms. The first form is the “acts,” which purport to recount the trials of the martyrs. These are probably not verbatim transcripts of the court proceedings but are based on witnesses’ recollections; most retell the dialogues between the confessors and the judges. These *acta* were heavily rewritten over the centuries and must be used with caution as historical sources. (In chapter 9 I discuss how the Acts of Vincent were substantially modified to meet changing theological ideas.) A second form of martyr accounts were “passions,” which were descriptions of the last days and death of a martyr. Some of these are highly imaginative, but others, such as the “Passion of
Perpetua,” record an authentic firsthand account of the diary of the martyr’s last days. Throughout this book readers will come to know many of the acts and passions of the martyrs.

In addition to these accounts of individual martyrs, the most important text is Eusebius’s *History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, which recounts the victory of the church over the forces of Rome. Eusebius was born about 260 and died about 339. Therefore, he lived through the worst of the persecutions and was able to celebrate the victory of the church under Constantine. Not only is his firsthand account invaluable in its details, he also had access to the great libraries of the age and included letters, edicts, and martyrs’ acts within his history. Many of the primary sources that would otherwise have been lost remain thanks to Eusebius’s care. (In the appendix at the back of this book I list the martyrs described by Eusebius so readers can see the influence of this renowned eyewitness to church history.)

Creation of texts on martyrs continued well beyond the end of the persecutions. Hundreds of *acta* were composed in the fourth and fifth centuries to celebrate the anniversaries of the deaths of martyrs, and legends continued to be written for centuries afterward. How many of these were accurate, or even preserved the memory of real martyrs? We have no idea, but one thing is certain—the faithful believed and treasured the accounts, so the narratives themselves became highly influential as Christians read them annually on the feast day of the saint (usually the day of his or her death). For example, the poet Prudentius, who lived in Spain in the early fifth century, composed a series of poetic versions of the passion of martyrs, and his were recited annually on the martyr’s feast day. These poetic versions were influential because, as we will see in chapters 7 and 9, the poetry added a symbolic dimension to the accounts, and some of the poetic images took on a reality of their own.

In addition to these sources, each major city had a list of martyrs whose festivals they celebrated, and these martyrologies at least give us the names of the early martyrs even if we have no surviving accounts of their deaths. The Martyrology of Carthage alone contained eighty-six entries. The congregations had such love and veneration for these accounts that many people treated the texts with the same respect they accorded holy scripture, and they celebrated the saints’ feast days with the same joy and awe that surrounded other festivals of the church calendar.

A final source of our information about the continuing importance of martyrs comes from visual evidence: drawings, illustrations in manuscripts, and paintings from the ancient world to the present all testify to people’s desire to remember the extraordinary deeds of these early Christians. Most of these portrayals are explicit, indeed too graphic for modern sensibilities. The illustration that opens chapter 1, for example, was a drawing done in the sixteenth century to show tortures that the ancient Christians experienced, and the early twentieth-century translator of the work reminds us that the illustrations may be at first repellent, but then we are to lead to an enhanced admiration for the passion of the ancients. I hope readers of this work will share this view and look at the illustrations as the ancients did—with awe for the blood of martyrs that was spilled in the early battles for the soul of the Roman Empire.

As I explore various ways the violence of the ancient world influenced many of our attitudes, I will repeatedly refer to these letters, acts, passions, and pictures. After all, what was enduring was not the deaths themselves but people’s recollections of the brave witnesses; historians always study not only the past but also the memories of the past, for the latter are more influential than the former.

Periodically throughout this book, I draw parallels with modern examples. I ask readers’ indulgence as people as varied as Jim Jones, David Koresh, and Palestinian suicide bombers appear in a narrative about ancient martyrs. My thesis is that martyrs matter, and they matter for a long time, even to our modern headlines. By exploring the roots of these ideas we may perhaps understand our world a little better. I have to admit a second purpose for writing: I do not think we need martyrs any more (if we ever needed them at all). It is time to recognize that faith is not compromised by discourse, that ideas can change without
bloodshed, and that differences are not cause for killing. Unfortunately, that day is not yet here; so for now, I invite readers to explore the intersection of faith, blood, and the legacy of the unintended consequences of the age of the martyrs.
PRIMARY SOURCES


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