

Remembering Anabaptist martyrs

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I am currently writing a book about martyrdom in the Anabaptist tradition, and I am always a little bit trepidatious about telling people that this is what I spend my time researching. What kind of person willingly devotes their days to reading stories about people being tortured and executed on account of their religious beliefs? I take some solace in the knowledge that I am not alone in my fascination with martyr stories. *Martyrs Mirror*, the massive Mennonite martyrology first published in 1660, clocks in at 1,160 pages in its most recent English edition and has been

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in print for centuries. It is now helpfully available in e-book form for those who lack the upper-body strength and shelf space needed to accommodate the hard-cover edition.¹

Martyr stories are also an unavoidable part of Anabaptist history. The first adult “believers’ baptisms” of the Reformation, whose five-hundredth anniversary

we will celebrate in 2025, took place in the home of Felix Manz. Two years later, the same Felix Manz became the first person to be executed for the crime of re-baptism when he was condemned to drown in the Limmat River by the Zurich city council on January 5, 1527. George Blaurock was the first to ask his friend, Conrad Grebel, to baptize him at that illegal gathering hosted by Manz. He was burned at the stake as a heretic in 1529. First-generation leaders Michael Sattler, Hans Hut, and Balthasar Hubmaier met similar ends. Over the next century-and-a-half, some 2,000–4,000 others would be executed for their Anabaptist beliefs in the territories of Northern and Central Europe.²

1 Thieleman van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror: The Story of Seventeen Centuries of Christ Martyrdom, From the Time of Christ to A.D. 1660*, translated by Joseph Sohm (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1938). *Martyrs Mirror* was first translated from Dutch into German in 1749 and then into English in 1837.

2 Brad D. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 201.

From the earliest days of the Anabaptist movement, its adherents have commemorated their executed co-religionists as martyrs. They collected, copied, circulated, and sang the stories of their fellows' interrogations and executions. The oldest surviving Anabaptist martyrology, *The Sacrifice unto the Lord*, was published clandestinely in 1562. New editions documenting ever more martyrs followed in quick succession. *Martyrs Mirror* therefore marks not the beginning but the culmination of a tradition more than a century old of Anabaptists preserving the memory of their martyrs.

The complicated legacy of martyrdom

If it is impossible to tell the story of Anabaptist origins without talking about martyrs, it is also true that the legacy the martyrs have left for the churches who claim them as their spiritual (and sometimes genetic) ancestors is a complicated one. There is something paradoxical about the degree of interest that pacifist, nonviolent Mennonites take in celebrating the torturous deaths of our predecessors. In both its text and (especially) its images, *Martyrs Mirror* offers a pious justification for our gaze to linger on graphic depictions of gory executions. In recent years, Mennonites have also begun to grapple with the ways that the valorization of suffering exemplified in the celebration of our martyrs have contributed to cultures of abuse that silence victims and protect people in power.³

The early Anabaptist martyr stories are also troubling in that they bring up the uncomfortable fact that both the martyrs and their persecutors believed themselves to be obeying the demands of the Christian faith. The executions of Anabaptists constitute part of the larger history of Christianity as a religion for which its adherents have been willing both to die and to kill. We may wish to object that the Anabaptists were not the ones doing the killing—and to congratulate ourselves for this fact. From our pluralist twenty-first-century perspective, the Anabaptists' Christian persecutors are easy enough to condemn. In contemporary North America, where the houses of worship of a dozen or more different denominations can easily coexist in a given neighbourhood—to say nothing of

3 Julia Spicher Kasdorf recounts memories of the sexual abuse she suffered at the hand of a well-respected man in her Mennonite community. "When the man was done," she writes, "I would let his wood-framed cellar door slam shut and walk home through the backyards, thinking, 'well, that was not so bad. It was only my body.' I think that the martyr stories taught me that wonderful splintering trick: it is only the body." Julia Spicher Kasdorf, "Writing Like a Mennonite," in *Tongue Screws and Testimonies: Poems, Stories, and Essays Inspired by the Martyrs Mirror*, edited by Kirsten Eve Beachy (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2010), 165–182; quote from 167.

the local mosque, synagogue, and gurdwara—it seems absurd that some Christians would be willing to see other believers executed simply for following the teachings of the Bible as they understood them. This raises the question: Why did so many Christians in the sixteenth century believe that Anabaptists were dangerous and that their violent repression was necessary to prevent widespread social disorder?

The history of martyrdom

To begin to answer the above question, we can explore how the idea of martyrdom has developed and been put to use through Christian history. Martyrdom was not something that early Anabaptists invented. One of the potential dangers of focussing too much of our attention on the birth of Anabaptism five hundred years ago is that it tempts us to see Anabaptism as a completely new thing, fully severed from the larger history of the Christian church. But Anabaptism, no less than the other churches that emerged from the Reformations, grew out of the European medieval church, and its past is no less our past than it is the past of our Roman Catholic siblings. During the Reformation, every faction in the splintering Western church encountered opposition at the hands of other Christians at one point or another, and every faction commemorated those of their own Christian persuasion who suffered for their beliefs as martyrs.⁴ That Anabaptists interpreted the deaths and displacements of their fellows as martyrdoms does not make them unique among Christians. Rather, by telling martyr stories, Anabaptists participated in a long, common tradition of piety that they share with many different groups of Christians who have had to make sense of the suffering they experienced as a result of their faith in a God they believe to be both omnipotent and good.

For as long as Christians have been commemorating martyrs, they have also disagreed with each other who qualifies for the designation. The English word *martyr* derives from the Greek *martys*, which initially meant “witness” or “testimony.” By the middle of the second century CE, Christians had begun to use *martys* to specify someone whose testimony *I am a Christian* resulted in their death. One of the earliest surviving Christian texts to use *martys* in this way is the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, which narrates the arrest, interrogation, and execution of Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna. At the outset of the text, Polycarp’s faithful death in imitation

⁴ Brad Gregory’s *Salvation at the Stake* is an excellent resource for exploring martyrdom during the Reformation across Christian denominations.

of Christ is contrasted with the cautionary tale of a failed martyr named Quintus. When Polycarp hears that there have been calls for his arrest, he withdraws from the city and quietly awaits his capture at a country estate. Quintus, by contrast, not only surrenders himself to the authorities; he also “forcefully induced others to surrender voluntarily.”⁵ When

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faced with the beasts he is to battle in the arena, Quintus, overcome by fear, apostatizes. “Therefore,” the narrator intones, “we do not commend those who surrender of their own accord, since the gospel does not so teach.”

Clement of Alexandria, a theologian who wrote not long after the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* was first circulated, echoes its critique of Christians who

show too much enthusiasm for martyrdom, calling them “poor wretches dying through hatred of the Creator.” These, he charges, “banish themselves without being martyrs, even though they are punished publicly. For they do not preserve the characteristic mark of believing martyrdom, inasmuch as they have not known the only true God, but give themselves up to a vain death.”⁶

Not all early Christians agreed with Clement’s condemnation of so-called voluntary martyrdom.⁷ In the *Martyrs of Palestine*, Eusebius of Caesarea praises a youth named Apphianus for interrupting a pagan sacrifice by reaching out and grabbing the hand of the city prefect, Urbanus, as he was about to offer incense to the gods. Apphianus is quickly arrested, and over the next four days, he is subjected to round after round of torture before being flung into the Mediterranean Sea with stones tied to his feet. Far from condemning the rashness of his action, Eusebius praises Apphianus for his “courage, boldness, constancy, and ever more than these the daring deed itself, which evidenced a zeal for religion and a spirit truly

5 *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 4.1 in Éric Rebillard, *Greek and Latin Narratives about the Ancient Martyrs* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

6 Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 4.16–17. English translation in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1890).

7 There is an ongoing scholarly debate over just how widespread “voluntary martyrdom” was in the second and third centuries. See Candida Moss, “The Discourse of Voluntary Martyrdom: Ancient and Modern,” *Church History* 81 (2012): 531–51.

superhuman.”⁸ One factor that may have influenced Eusebius’s praise was that he knew Apphianus well. The two lived together in a community of Christian philosophers at the home of Pamphilius, the bishop of Caesarea Maritima. On the morning that Apphianus was arrested, Eusebius

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reveals, he told no one of his intentions, concealing them even “from us who were in the same house with him.”

While Saint Augustine would later famously insist that it is “the cause, and not the punishment,” that makes someone a martyr, the example of Apphianus suggests that it is the *community* that makes the martyr rather than the cause.⁹

There are no universally accepted criteria for determining which deaths qualify as martyrdoms. The fact that martyrs are produced in the aftermath of violent opposition attests that the designation is by nature contestable. As Daniel Boyarin has observed of early Christian martyrdom, “For the Romans, it didn’t matter much whether the lions were eating a robber or a bishop, and it probably didn’t make much of a difference to the lions, either, but the robber’s friends and the bishop’s friends told different stories about those leonine meals. It is in these stories that martyrdom, as opposed to execution or dinner, can be found, not in ‘what happened.’”¹⁰

Martyrs are made not by executioners but by a community who keeps the memory of their fallen comrades alive through acts of commemoration. Martyr stories are not journalistic accounts, nor do they make any claim of being unbiased. Rather, they are constructed to suit the needs of their audience and, as such, change over time with the telling. A martyr is less a person who has been killed for a cause than the collective memory of a death that is told in a such a way as to be meaningful for the community who holds it. The upshot is that the same person my community

8 Eusebius of Caesarea, *Martyrs of Palestine* 4.4. English translation in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, edited Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1890).

9 Augustine, “Sermon 94a,” in Saint Augustine, *Sermons*, vol. 4, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, edited by John E. Rotelle; translated by Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1992).


10 Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 94.

celebrates as a martyr may well be condemned by your community as a religious extremist—or worse.

Early Anabaptist martyrs

Which brings us back to the early Anabaptist martyrs. *Martyrs Mirror* consists of a fascinating and sometimes bewildering mishmash of confessions of faith, letters written by condemned Anabaptists to their loved ones, interrogation records, and sentences extracted from official archives that were selected, edited, preserved, and copied by Anabaptists for the purpose of inspiring other Anabaptists. That is not to suggest that they are not authentic, but it is to remind us that they are not disinterested. *Martyrs Mirror* aims to depict the early Anabaptists in the best possible light.

Of the thousands of Anabaptists who faced execution—and the eight hundred or so whose names are mentioned in *Martyrs Mirror*—modern Mennonites regularly retell only a handful of their stories. Among them, no Anabaptist martyr is more celebrated than Dirk Willems. Willems was

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sentenced to death on May 16, 1569, having confessed to “harboring and admitting secret conventicles and prohibited doctrines, and that he also has permitted several persons to be rebaptized in his aforesaid house.”¹¹ While attempt-

ing to escape capture, he ran onto a frozen river with the town thief-catcher in hot pursuit. When his pursuer broke through the ice, Dirk turned around to rescue him, demonstrating self-sacrificial enemy love in the most literal of ways. The reward for his compassion is death at the stake.

Dirk is in many ways the ideal martyr for modern Mennonites. We retell the story of his selfless actions because they align well with our own sense of the best of our faith and with how we would like others to see us. But Dirk’s story takes up less than a page of *Martyrs Mirror*. In many of the surrounding entries, the Anabaptists come off as rather less selfless, less loving, and more confrontational, even combative. For example, a letter attributed to Hans van Overdam addressed to the Lords and Councillors of Ghent that precipitated his arrest castigates them as “false prophets who resist the truth, even as the Egyptian magicians resisted Moses.” He goes on to charge that the devil himself has “bewitched and blinded your eyes, so that you do not know yourselves, who you are, and how sorely you

¹¹ *Martyrs Mirror*, 741–42.

have incurred the wrath of God.” It is on the Anabaptists’ side that God fights, and the persecution that they suffer is God’s will. They are willing to suffer in the present for they know “Him that hath said, ‘vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense,’ saith the Lord.”¹²

The Anabaptist martyrologies portray the executed faithful as both innocent victims and triumphant heroes, and this portrayal has generally been affirmed and repeated throughout Mennonite history. The making of heroes, however, tends to require the services of villains, and the early martyrologists found no shortage of ready candidates among the informants, interrogators, and executioners who persecuted their fellows. I prefer Dirk Willems to Hans van Overdam and am not at all surprised that it is Dirk, with his bent knee and outstretched hand, that has become the iconic image of the martyrs celebrated by Mennonites today. But as we tell the story of Anabaptism’s origins on the occasion of its five-hundredth anniversary, I think it is important to acknowledge the double-edgedness of the martyrs’ power. The martyr is, by definition, a religious extremist, someone who is willing to die rather than to equivocate or compromise. The same can be said for the inquisitor.

Conclusion

I still find the early Anabaptist martyrs compelling. In their deaths they testify that some things that are worth more than our earthly lives. Their conviction can, and does, inspire comfortable Christians to think more deeply about what we would be willing to endure for the sake of our more cherished beliefs. At the same time, I often find myself troubled by the stories of martyrs who willingly, even joyfully, went to their deaths, revelling in the anticipated vengeance they expected God to rain down on their persecutors. Our martyr stories are not only triumphant tales of courageous heroes but also sad artefacts of the inability of Christians to find ways to disagree with each other charitably, testifying to the ease with which we are willing to vilify each other and to attribute genuine good-faith disagreement to the devil’s machinations. What we are celebrating as the five-hundredth birthday of Anabaptism is also the anniversary of a painful rending of the body of Christ. Jeremy Bergen has criticized the ways in which “martyr memories may be reduced to commodities that circulate in an economy of pious heroism, nostalgia, and sentimentality.” I think he is right, and I echo his suggestion that our martyr stories re-

12 *Martyrs Mirror*, 492–93.

quire a “re-membering in the sense of making whole” that integrates the experience of the Anabaptist martyrs into the bigger story of the Christian church.¹³ To tell such a story would require us to speak about martyrs in alternating voices of appreciation and lament and to remember that the church to which we belong has a history that stretches back far further than five hundred years.

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13 Jeremy Bergen, “Problem or Promise? Confessional Martyrs in Mennonite-Roman Catholic Relations,” in *Martyrdom in an Ecumenical Perspective*, edited by Peter C. Erb (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2007), 175–205; quote from 195.