

Introduction

Christianity and Freedom

Ancient Roots and Historical Innovations

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On Sunday, February 15, 2015, the Islamic State (IS) released a video that showed masked members of a newly formed branch of the militant group in Libya beheading twenty-one Coptic Christians on a beach near Tripoli. Under the title “A Message Signed with Blood to the Nation of the Cross,” the video included remarks by a lead executioner – speaking in fluent English with an American accent – who underscored that he and his fellow religious warriors were fighting proudly under the banner of the Islamic State group. They were intent on avenging the killing of “Sheikh” Osama bin Laden, he said, and on expanding the war against the “cross” that IS began in Syria. “O, people, recently you have seen us on the hills of as-Sham and Dabiq’s plain, chopping off the heads that have been carrying the cross for a long time,” the fighter said, using Arabic terms for places in and around Syria. “Today, we are on the south of Rome, on the land of Islam, Libya, sending another message.” The captives are made to kneel in the sand, and then, according to the account by the *New York Times*, “they are simultaneously beheaded with the theatrical brutality that has become the trademark of Islamic State extremists.”¹

A day after the release of the video, “Rome” responded. Speaking in fact from Rome (or Vatican City, technically), the man personifying the “Rome” of the Islamic State’s imagination, Pope Francis, head of the Roman Catholic Church and undoubtedly the world’s most well-recognized and influential Christian leader, expressed his “profound sorrow” about the beheadings. “Today, I read about the execution of those twenty-one or twenty-two Coptic Christians,” he announced, in off-the-cuff remarks delivered in his native Spanish. “Their only words were: ‘Jesus, help me!’ They were killed simply for the fact that they were Christians. . . . The blood of our Christian brothers and sisters is a testimony which cries out to be heard.” In an extended departure from a prepared speech he was delivering to representatives of the Church of Scotland, he continued: “It makes no difference whether they be Catholics, Orthodox, Copts or Protestants. They are Christians! Their blood is one and the same. Their blood confesses Christ. As we recall these brothers and sisters

who died only because they confessed Christ, I ask that we encourage each another to go forward with this ecumenism which is giving us strength, the ecumenism of blood. The martyrs belong to all Christians.”²

In these heartfelt remarks, three points stood out. One was the pope’s emphatic casting of the twenty-one Coptic Christians beheaded on that Libyan beach as more than passive, voiceless victims. They were not mere objects of violence but subjects who had *spoken*. As the pope suggested, some of them appeared to whisper the name of Jesus as they were executed: “Jesus, help me!” They were agents, active witnesses, not mere bystanders at their own deaths. Another striking aspect was that, quite apart from what these Coptic Christians may or may not have said before they died, their very death – their very “blood” – *said* something. And what it said was significant. Their blood was a “testimony” that “cries out to be heard.” And the fact that this blood flows from Christians of various confessions – “Catholics, Orthodox, Copts or Protestants” – creates an “ecumenism of blood,” a phrase the pope has used on many occasions. The “martyrs” are not from only one church or confession. They “belong to all Christians.” A third striking feature of the pope’s remarks was that he emphasized that the shedding of their blood did not bespeak weakness or compelled submission. Instead, the ecumenism of blood is fruitful and productive. Specifically, the pope said, it is something that is “giving us strength.”

In other words, the Islamic State’s videotaped beheadings intended to deliver one “message” across the waters of the Mediterranean from Libya to Rome – “A Message Signed with Blood to the Nation of the Cross.” But the pope insisted that he heard an entirely different message.

The Islamic State had indeed worked diligently to craft its intended message. With technically polished videography, including “slow motion, aerial footage and the quick cuts of a music video,” the group produced a multilayered text for the world to read.³ It is not hard to decipher its intended meaning. Christians should “feel themselves subdued” and yield to the Islamic State as it expands its rule across the Middle East and North Africa. Or they will be killed as recalcitrant infidels. Muslims must recognize that the Islamic State has at last established the true caliphate – one that fully enforces Islamic law – and they must pledge their allegiance in order to be obedient Muslims. Or they, too, will be killed – perhaps with even greater alacrity – as apostates.

Yet the pope insisted with deep and affecting emotion that the blood of the beheaded Copts “cries out” with a different message. Rather than a sign of submission, their blood is a wellspring of strength. Furthermore, the pope’s very rhetorical formulation – *their blood “cries out to be heard”* – was pregnant with significance. In other words, the pope, too, had a carefully crafted message. Indeed, unmistakably, his words were an intentional echo of a quite well-known text – the Genesis account of God’s horrified reaction to Cain’s murder of Abel. “What have

you done?” the Lord asks Cain. “*The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground*” (Genesis 4:11). For the first time in the biblical record, one man had shed the blood of another man. The victim is dead. The murderer attempts evasion and cover-up. But the blood is there to speak; it has a “voice.” And when it speaks, someone is there to hear: “The voice . . . is *crying to me* from the ground.”

And no doubt Pope Francis, in echoing the Genesis story, intended to recall the wider text and context of the early chapters of Genesis, which underscore just why Abel’s blood has a “voice” that can reach the ears of God. Abel’s blood, we are told in the first chapter of Genesis, is the blood of a being who is nothing less than godlike, a veritable deity in miniature, because he has something of God’s very character and royal dignity woven into his own nature and capacities. From the template of his own being, we are told, God had deliberately and carefully fashioned one, and only one, creature: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:26a, 27).

Such were some of the layers of meaning explicit and implicit in the pope’s own carefully crafted, if spontaneous, message of blood.

But *can* such an *unspeakable* crime really *speak*, after all? If the blood of the Coptic Christians killed on that beach in February 2015 “cries out to be heard,” what can it really be saying to us? Can it say anything intelligible, much less constructive? Can the blood of these victims represent anything more than what Hannah Arendt termed the “banality of evil,” a mute negation or nullity? Does their blood truly “cry out”? If so, what message does it carry?

THE VOLUMES

In a sense, the contributions assembled in this volume, as well as those in its companion volume, *Christianity and Freedom: Contemporary Perspectives*, record the net result of numerous Christian attempts to listen to the blood of the persecuted and the violated. Beginning with the earliest ages of the church, many different kinds of Christians, widely dispersed across time and space, have frequently claimed to have something intelligible and significant to say about their own persecution and unjust suffering. In addition, notably, they have frequently claimed to have something to say about persecution and unjust violence suffered by others.

The early North African Church Father Tertullian is often quoted as observing that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” In fact, what Tertullian actually said was, characteristically, more terse and enigmatic. “*Semen est sanguis Christianorum,*” he wrote in his *Apology* of about 197: “the blood of Christians is seed.” While the context suggests that what Tertullian had primarily in mind was the notion that Christian martyrdom begets Christian growth, the less neat and more open-ended formula he actually used can be taken to represent the frequent

pattern of Christian reflection on persecution and violence. For many Christians across history, “blood” has often acted as “seed.” And it has been “seed” in a very wide sense.

The outstanding statistical expert on historical and contemporary Christian growth patterns Todd M. Johnson confirms in his contribution to the companion volume on *Contemporary Perspectives* that the primary sense of Tertullian’s famous claim is probably correct: There is much evidence to suggest that persecution to the point of martyrdom frequently spurs the numerical or demographic expansion of Christian communities. Very often, from late antiquity to the recent history of Africa and Asia, Christian blood has germinated Christian growth.

The focus of these volumes, however, is another sense in which “blood” has acted as “seed.” Christian encounter with the persecution and unjust violence suffered by fellow Christians as well as non-Christians has frequently elicited an extraordinarily wide range of innovative and fruitful responses in both theory and practice. In particular, the essays collected in these volumes emphasize that innovative and ultimately extraordinarily influential ideas and practices of *freedom* have regularly emerged from Christian experiences of persecution, opposition, and unjust violence. In many cases, Christian reflection on, and experience of, systematic and sustained persecution and suppression by others – including by other Christians – have yielded innovative, demanding, and radical principles of human freedom. To be specific, Christians, especially Christians on the receiving end of severe social and political pressure, have made crucial contributions to the introduction and development of many of the most important principles and practices of freedom that are influential and widely considered normative in the world today, such as religious liberty, freedom of conscience and belief, notions of human rights and human dignity, limited government, and the differentiation of religious and political authority. Furthermore, as the companion volume on *Contemporary Perspectives* underscores, there is remarkable evidence of the ongoing social and political fertility of Christian communities in the face of a rising – and spreading – crescendo of global anti-Christian pressure and persecution.

In short, across a remarkable range of historical and contemporary contexts, Christian experiences of “blood,” sifted through the basic doctrines of Christian theology and anthropology, have yielded numerous new “seeds” of freedom and liberty, often with little or no historical precedent.

In advancing these arguments concerning the significance and nature of Christianity’s historical and contemporary contributions to freedom, we can lay little claim to novelty. The contributions to this volume coincide with, and build on, the prior work of numerous historians, theologians, and other scholars, including Brian Tierney, John Witte, Jeremy Waldron, Rodney Stark, Robert Wilken, Elaine Pagels, Kyle Harper, Nicholas Wolterstorff, John Finnis, Harold Berman,

Peter Brown, David Little, Larry Siedentop, and Susan Holman.⁴ Yet it is not only scholars who have rightly emphasized the indebtedness of apparently modern ideas of religious freedom and human dignity to an ancient past. The bishops of the Roman Catholic Church gathered for the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) promulgated *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Council’s Declaration on Religious Freedom, on the Council’s last day, December 7, 1965 – a little more than fifty years ago. In handing down a Declaration dedicated to expounding every human person’s “right to religious freedom” [*ius ad libertatem religiosam*] (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 2), the Council adopted an approach that clearly differed in rhetorical tone and emphasis from that of many nineteenth and twentieth-century popes, who regularly condemned “liberalism” (a favorite bogeyman they did not always clearly define). In that sense, in the document’s own words, *Dignitatis Humanae* was a “new” thing. But the Council fathers also stressed that its “new” teaching was “in harmony with the old” (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 1). In fact, *Dignitatis* rightly points to the similarities between its own teaching and that of some previous popes (such as Pope John XXIII in *Pacem in Terris* and Pope Pius XII in his Radio Message of December 24, 1942) but also to the deep and ancient roots of religious freedom understood as an immunity from religious coercion in scriptural and patristic sources, prominent among them being Lactantius.⁵

At the same time, it is equally true that our arguments run against the grain of much contemporary opinion, most notably standard scholarly opinion about the history of political and legal thought. For example, despite prevailing academic fashions that make “essentialism” a cardinal hermeneutical sin, many scholars argue without embarrassment or qualification that the salient political fact about Christianity is its essential intolerance and uniform record of illiberalism. Historian Perez Zagorin begins his study of the origins of religious toleration with the lapidary (and unsubstantiated) observation that “[o]f all the great world religions past and present, Christianity has been by far the most intolerant.” He goes on to say that the “extremely intolerant” character of the Christian church as an institution was evident “[f]rom its inception.”⁶ And no less than John Rawls, among the most influential political philosophers of the twentieth century, made a consistent point of emphasizing Christianity’s essential political illiberalism as a “fact[] of historical experience” and a crucial point of departure for his own theory of “political liberalism.” In fact, in one of his last works published before his death in 2002, Rawls noted with remarkable candor that the whole “content and tone” of his conception of justice was “undoubtedly influenced” by “dwelling upon” the “endless oppressions and cruelties of state power and inquisition used to sustain Christian unity beginning as early as St. Augustine and extending into the eighteenth century.”⁷ It is no exaggeration that the essential incompatibility between modern liberalism and traditional Christianity – with the latter’s commitment to such doctrines as eternal damnation – is no mere

marginal sub-text but a recurring theme in Rawls's work, as well as that of other major political theorists in recent years.⁸

Other scholars emphasize the “generally” repressive character of Christianity throughout history but allow that occasionally – very occasionally – idiosyncratic expressions of liberal Christianity and “free faith” managed to puncture its otherwise hard shell of dogmatic rigidity and political intolerance.⁹ Furthermore, this common view goes, such liberal breakthroughs have occurred only under exceptional circumstances, and typically only despite the doctrinal content and official practice of mainstream Christianity and its orthodox hierarchs. So, for example, it is conceded that a Christian such as Roger Williams promoted a robust and pioneering form of religious freedom; but according to one prominent scholar, this teaching derives from Williams's hidden debt to Stoicism, not from his Christian theology.¹⁰ Likewise, it is often noted that fresh and compelling affirmations of religious freedom and constitutional government emerged from the religious and social ferment of the Protestant Reformation; but many scholars suggest that the Reformation's dissenting underbelly, the so-called Radical Reformation, deserves the lion's share of the credit, rather than the mainstream, “magisterial” Reformation of Calvin, Luther, and Zwingli.¹¹ In fact, according to Perez Zagorin, modern conceptions of religious toleration and religious freedom are “almost entirely due” to “unorthodox Protestants” (as well as the unorthodox Jewish philosopher Spinoza) in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹² Finally, in the opinion of a number of significant scholars of human rights, the mid-twentieth century saw Protestant and Catholic figures such as Pope Pius XII formulate a robust discourse of human dignity and human rights, which these Christian leaders then worked to integrate into postwar European politics and international law;¹³ but one of these scholars argues that these Christians mobilized (and indeed “invented”) this language to serve primarily conservative and even reactionary purposes.¹⁴

In short, according to this body of scholarship, even on the rare occasions where Christianity *appears* to promote political and religious freedom, the underlying reality is more complicated and owes little, if anything, to Christianity per se. Either those Christian advocates of genuine liberal political innovation (such as John Locke) were not genuine Christians, as Leo Strauss and his influential students have long argued;¹⁵ or genuine advocacy of religious and political freedom on the part of genuine Christians was not actually motivated or underpinned by their Christianity (as has been alleged in the case of Roger Williams); or the fiercest and most effective Christian advocates of religious and political freedom practiced unorthodox forms of Christianity radically marginal to mainstream Christian tradition (as in the view of Perez Zagorin); or the apparently liberal and democratic political agendas (including the agenda of “religious freedom”) advanced by genuine Christian leaders (such as Pope Pius XII) turned out to be illiberal, restrictive, and reactionary.¹⁶ The

upshot of all of this is that the vast expanse of Christian history produced at best “minor antecedents” of liberal ideas and practices of religious freedom and human rights – antecedents that, moreover, were often largely irrelevant to politics because they concerned the moral or metaphysical status of human beings rather than their concrete political claims, rights, and interests.¹⁷

On the contrary, the many diverse contributors to this volume suggest that mainstream historic Christianity has frequently generated powerful ideas and practices of social and political freedom. Furthermore, in many of these cases, it is precisely some of the central, dogmatic affirmations of Christianity that have encouraged and inspired innovative notions and practices of freedom. In other words it is not only exceptional or marginal or in-spite-of-itself Christianity that has proven politically liberating. With remarkable frequency and in important cases, fresh notions and institutions of political and religious freedom have flowed directly from mainstream Christianity, whether in its Catholic, Orthodox, or Reformed expressions. Furthermore, these notions and institutions have often been directly inspired by what might be called a radical realism concerning the veracity and relevance of key theological doctrines, such as God’s creation of all human beings in his image and God’s assumption of human nature in the Incarnation.

Again, however, we advance these arguments with a twist. These volumes emphasize that some of the most compelling and enduring Christian reflections on freedom and liberation have emerged, alas, from a crucible of violent victimization. Across history, Christian-inspired oppression has spilled the blood of too many innocent victims. Across much of the same history, however, many Christians have listened closely to the voices of innocent victims and heard their blood crying out from the ground. No doubt Christian theology, centered around the worship of a Victim, has regularly encouraged some Christians to see in these victims’ faces and hear in their voices a transcendent cry for freedom and justice, as if it were uttered by God himself.

THE CHAPTERS

As I argue in my own contribution to this volume, the fertility of Christian reflection on persecution is evident from the beginning of Christian history, including in the earliest Fathers of the Church. In particular, sixteen hundred years before the European Enlightenment and against prevailing narratives of intellectual history, early Christians developed a robust concept of religious freedom. This will appear an astonishing claim to many, in part because of a prevailing image of the early Church Fathers and early Christians in general as grim, fanatical, and intolerant – an image whose contours and durability owe a great deal to Edward Gibbon’s seductive and long-influential account in *The History of the Decline and Fall of the*

Roman Empire. It is also remarkable because there was much in the theological armory and eschatological horizon of the early Fathers that predisposed them to a merely passive, quasi-fatalistic acceptance (if not active embrace) of persecution.

In fact, despite numerous powerful forces – political-theological, Christological, kerygmatic, eschatological – motivating early Christians to abide persecution, several early Church Fathers incubated highly original and robust articulations of religious freedom. These fathers, including Justin Martyr, Athenagoras of Athens, and Tertullian in the second and third centuries, as well as Lactantius in the early fourth century, made a series of appeals to Roman officials in which they nimbly defended their lives and beliefs in the face of various persecutorial policies and waves of opposition from the powers that be. But more than tactically plea for Roman toleration or forbearance, these Fathers innovated unprecedented and full-throated arguments in support of religious freedom as an individual natural right possessed by all people, regardless of their religious convictions. Most remarkable in this regard was Tertullian, who used the concept and indeed very phrase *libertas religionis*, “religious liberty,” for the first time in history in his *Apology* of the late second century (ca. 197). Furthermore, he later made the even more stunning claim in *Ad Scapulam*, a letter to the Roman proconsul of Carthage in 212, that “it is a fundamental human right [*humani iuris*], a privilege (or inherent capacity) of nature [*naturalis potestatis*], that every man should worship according to his own convictions: one man’s religion neither harms nor helps another man. It is assuredly no part of religion to compel religion – to which free-will and not force should lead us.”

These conceptual and rhetorical innovations yielded important consequences, first, because they probably eventually influenced imperial policy. The most notable example is the so-called Edict of Milan of 313, which declared – in a clear echo of patristic arguments – that “Christians and all others should have the free and unrestricted right [*liberam potestatem*] to follow that mode of religion which to each of them appeared best.” This was not an act of mere toleration or indulgence. It was the world’s first declaration of universal religious freedom. As such, the content of the historic “Edict” reflected the force of radical patristic argument and conceptual innovation by viewing religion as a realm of free will rather than binding civic obligation (even though of course the decision to promulgate the “Edict” – by the two coemperors of the time, Constantine and Licinius – also reflected concrete political calculations and interests).

In her contribution to this volume, the historian of late antiquity Elizabeth DePalma Digeser explores how and why radical patristic ideas of religious freedom came to exercise such a powerful influence on imperial Rome. This influence is indeed remarkable, not least because it became so palpable in such a short period. After all, only a century separated Tertullian’s *Ad Scapulam* and the “Edict” of

Milan. The influence is remarkable, too, because advocates such as Tertullian and his fellow Christians were scarcely ideal messengers. At the beginning of the third century, they remained tiny and embattled, hardly a demographic speck. In the Carthage of Tertullian's time, a city of as many as 700,000, the Christian community may have numbered no more than two hundred or three hundred.¹⁸ And precious few of their fellow citizens would have regarded their stand for their religion – or their “conscience,” one of Tertullian's favorite words – as attractive, let alone heroic. John Henry Newman, in his historical novel *Callista*, set in third-century North Africa, captures the combination of incomprehension and horror with which Christianity was typically regarded:

In that day there were many rites and worships which kept to themselves – many forms of moroseness or misanthropy, as they were considered, which withdrew their votaries from the public ceremonial. The Catholic faith seemed to the multitude to be one of these; it was only in critical times, when some idolatrous act was insisted on by the magistrate, that the specific nature of Christianity was tested and detected. Then at length it was seen to differ from all other religious varieties by that irrational and disgusting obstinacy, as it was felt to be, which had rather suffer torments and lose life than submit to some graceful, or touching, or at least trifling observance which the tradition of ages had sanctioned.¹⁹

According to Digeser, a central figure in explaining how Christian ideas of freedom won a wider hearing in the upper echelons of the Roman *imperium* was Lactantius, the prominent fourth-century North African rhetorician. Digeser's essay describes how he proposed a policy of religious freedom to the emperor Constantine, and how Constantine drew on Lactantius as he gradually gained sole control over the Roman Empire. The North African was an erudite scholar, who consciously drew on the writings of Tertullian. However, Lactantius also departed from the style of Tertullian, whose *Apology* he criticized as too defensive and scattered (*Divine Institutes* V.1.23, V.4.3). Adopting a more systematic and constructive approach in his lengthy theological and political treatise *The Divine Institutes*, Lactantius argued that Christianity represented the positive fulfillment of Roman ideals of justice and piety. In the immediate context of the emperor Diocletian's Great Persecution (303–311), *The Divine Institutes* also argued that justice and piety demanded a policy of religious tolerance and religious freedom for all believers, including Christians. Indeed, the nature of religion per se, whether Christian or non-Christian, required such a policy. Lactantius pleaded with the pagan persecutors who were the intended audience of *The Divine Institutes* with unconcealed vehemence, begging them to understand that “the butcher's trade and piety are two very different things. . . . If you want to defend religion by bloodshed, torture and evil, then at once it will not be so defended: it will be polluted and outraged. There is nothing that is so much a matter

of willingness as religion, and if someone making sacrifice is spiritually turned off, then it's gone, it's nothing" (*Divine Institutes* V.19.17, 23).²⁰ He also argued for a policy of religious concord as a pillar of a future Christian state.

After becoming tutor to Constantine's oldest son, Crispus, sometime between 306 and 310, Lactantius found himself in the extraordinary position of being able to place his novel ideas before the emperor and the members of his court in Trier, Rome's northwestern imperial capital. Indeed, Digeser notes that there is evidence that Lactantius read *The Divine Institutes* to an audience in the imperial court that included Constantine himself. In any case, Digeser contends that Lactantius succeeded in persuading the emperor that religious repression was antithetical to government under Christian law. Where the emperor Diocletian's persecution strove for religious conformity through violence, Lactantius contended that political authorities could – and should – achieve authentic religious conformity only through voluntary conversion to religious truth. According to Digeser, this was perhaps his most important contribution to Western political thought.

However, it is well known that the Lactantian policy of religious freedom did not endure. It was not embraced by Rome's Christian emperors after Constantine, and it can be argued that Constantine himself never wholeheartedly adhered to the Lactantian program. Even more important for our purposes is the fact that Christian theologians within a few generations of Lactantius began to argue for the very kind of coerced religious uniformity the North African rhetorician had subjected to vehement criticism. By the early fifth century, the highest Christian authorities were busily fashioning biblical and theological arguments to justify severe religious coercion, particularly against the Donatists as well as other heretical and schismatic sects that proliferated in the early centuries of the church. Augustine of Hippo, another brilliant North African rhetorician who lived about a century after Lactantius, was perhaps the most prominent such convert to coercion.

In a volume on the historical relationship between Christianity and freedom, it is crucial to confront the question of how Christianity and coercion interacted in the thought and life of Augustine. Augustine, after all, represents something of a pivot point. Before Augustine, almost no major Christian authority advocated religious coercion, even against heretics and schismatics. After Augustine, and in no small part because of Augustine, many Christian authorities came to accept and even take for granted that such coercion could be justified at least under some circumstances. It then becomes essential to ask, how do we explain the great reversal that Augustine inaugurated in the relationship between Christianity and freedom? And was Augustine's own pivot toward religious coercion fully consistent with his own Christian theology?

The questions are particularly important and interesting because the trajectory of Augustine's own life and thought reveals a dramatic shift. As a young bishop,