Introduction

> The way of God, who disposes all things with gentleness, is to instill religion into our minds with reasoned arguments and into our hearts with grace, but attempting to instill it into hearts and minds with force and threats is to instill not religion but terror.
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> – Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*[1]

New demographic projections by the Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life anticipate that by the year 2050, adherents of Islam – the world's fastest growing religion – will equal the number of Christians around the world. Currently, Christianity is the world's largest religion with an estimated 2.2 billion followers (31 percent of the world's population), while Islam is second, with 1.6 billion followers (23 percent of the global population). However, over the next four decades, the two religious populations will attain parity, with both groups together accounting for roughly 64 percent of the world's total population. Other demographic changes in the study worth noting include (1) atheists (and all others who do not affiliate with any religion) will constitute a declining percentage of the total world's population, (2) four of ten Christians will live in sub-Saharan Africa, (3) Muslims will make up 10 percent of Europe's population, and (4) Islam will surpass Judaism as the largest non-Christian religion in the United States.[2]

Given Christianity's changing place in the global context, there is no more pressing issue for Christian theological reflection than the encounter of Christianity with other religions, especially in light of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon that resulted in an American-led

[1] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, rev. ed., trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), f. 172 (all citations from the *Pensées* use the fragment numbers (f.) from this translation).

[2] Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life, "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010–2050," April 2, 2015, available at www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010–2050/ (accessed December 20, 2015).

war against global terrorism, thereby perpetuating the image of Islam as a religion in conflict with Christianity and Western civilization and fueling further violence and terrorism. For better or worse, the perception of the United States in the world – especially the Muslim world – is negatively affected by what many view as a "neo-colonial attempt to redraw the map of the Middle East in light of American political and economic interests."[3] Ironically, much of the justification for US military involvement in the war on terror appealed to the Christian intellectual tradition, specifically just-war reasoning.[4] In a world of unabated religious violence, where the forces of globalization have made interaction between major religions an inescapable fact of life, dogmatic reflection demands clarity on the relationship of Christianity to other faiths. In other words, the systematic theologian must shoulder the responsibility of speaking the Word of God in a new situation, to a potentially hostile audience not fluent in the language of the church, while hopefully maintaining the delicate balance between prophetic challenge and Christian patience.

As a work of liberation theology, this investigation confronts religiously motivated political violence with the claim that underlying the three Abrahamic monotheistic traditions is a shared belief that God requires liberation for the oppressed, justice for victims, and most demanding of all, love for political enemies. While attempting a comparative theology in conversation with Judaism and Islam, this is a work of Christian theology and as such seeks neither to convert the other nor to reinterpret the other's religious traditions from a Christian perspective. This book's more modest goal is a constructive theological proposal for how to model religious pluralism and cooperation by retrieving distinctly Christian sources that nurture tolerance and facilitate coexistence while respecting religious difference. Mark Heim suggests that the "discussion of religious pluralism is strongly motivated by concern over historical conflict and violence among the religions."[5] To that end, he offers a "more pluralistic hypothesis" that respects real religious differences and does not attempt to gloss over or minimize the often contradictory claims of different religions but seeks instead to "equally respect and appreciate what we recognize is real but different."[6] Heim then

[3] John L. Esposito, *The Future of Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.
[4] See Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Just War against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World* (New York: Basic Books, 2003). For a response from both Christian and Muslim theologians, see David Fisher and Brian Wicker, eds., *Just War on Terror? A Christian and Muslim Response* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010).
[5] S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 185.
[6] Heim, *Salvations*, 156.

defends the view that "a diversity of religious ends can be interpreted and defended on Christian grounds."[7] This investigation embraces Heim's call for a more pluralistic theology that respects genuine religious difference through particularly Christian rationalizations and builds on his notion that the "decisive witness to Christ" is rightly expressed in a theology that affirms Christ as "*both* the necessary ground for particularistic witness *and* the basis for recognizing in other religious traditions their own particularistic integrity."[8]

Despite a common "ethical monotheism," relations between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam remain deeply conflictual, albeit with periods of religious tolerance interspersed throughout the history of all three faiths. For example, the Christianization of the Roman Empire imposed religious uniformity on all its subjects yet allowed Jews to retain their own religion. Centuries later, Islam followed a similar pattern of imperialism by converting pagans but allowing Jews and Christians to retain their religion, even if in a subordinate relation to the ruling Muslim powers. Thus, while Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share a broad range of cultural and historical influences – all three are monotheistic religions that view scripture as the core of tradition – they also share a history of religious exclusivism manifested as political violence, as attested by the long-standing struggle over the city of Jerusalem among the "People of the Book."[9] Still, for all this long and troubled history of conflict, the historical and cultural ties between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam facilitate comparative theological work.[10] Sadly, the experience of martyrdom – suffering and dying for one's faith – often accompanies historical interactions among the three Abrahamic religions. On the premise that no single theological voice can capture or represent a religion, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim martyr narratives that condone political violence – whether terrorist or state sponsored – should be subjected to critical scrutiny within each religion's canon of normative sources in order to evaluate how central or marginalized these discourses are to each tradition. It will be argued, despite recent conflation of martyrdom with political violence in the public imagination, that martyr narratives deserve consideration as potential resources for resisting political violence in contemporary theological reflection.

[7] *Ibid.*, 184. [8] *Ibid.*, 229 (emphasis in original).
[9] See Karen Armstrong, *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths* (New York: Knopf, 1996).
[10] See María Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2002), for a history of the cultural dialogue that took place in Medieval Spain between Muslims, Christians, and Jews that created a culture of tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

Why Martyrdom Matters

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the concept of martyrdom underwent a radical transformation in the public imagination. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a "martyr" as "a person who chooses to suffer death rather than renounce faith in Christ or obedience to his teachings" or, more broadly, as one "who undergoes death or great suffering for a faith, belief, or cause." However, media coverage of jihadist suicide bombers considers a martyr any person who dies for his or her faith – even one who murders innocents in the process. In light of this shift in the lexicon, and given how religiously motivated violence has affected world affairs since 9/11, it is vital that Christian theologians respond to this contemporary crisis.

While most religious and intellectual traditions advocate nonviolent conflict resolution, how do they pragmatically engage religiously motivated political violence? Two paradigms seem to dominate the public discourse: (1) the world's major religious traditions reject violent extremism and distance themselves from it but do not counter those extremists with active political resistance, and (2) some academics and public intellectuals blame religion as the cause of political violence (the "new atheism") and strive to remove religious perspectives from the public discourse.[11] This book presumes that both these popular perspectives are inadequate responses to the realities of religiously motivated political violence. The former approach fails to find political solutions for terrorism, perhaps out of fear, tacitly granting the perpetrators of terrorist violence theological credibility. The latter approach is reductionist and culturally imperialistic because it excludes religion as a dialogue partner even though the majority of the world's population, especially in regions like the Middle East and Latin America, profess strong theological beliefs and ground their political choices in these beliefs.

[11] Post 9/11, the "new atheism" was the name given to the movement coalescing around the extremely popular and best-selling books written by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and others. John F. Haught has characterized the movement as a species of secular fundamentalism. See Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hatchette Book Group, 2007); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005). For a variety of scholarly responses, see Amarnath Amarasingam, ed., *Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal* (Boston: Brill, 2010); for an explicitly Christian theological appraisal and critique of the "new atheism," see John F. Haught, *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2008).

This book-length monograph is a constructive theological proposal written from an explicitly Christian perspective – in critical conversation with Judaism and Islam – that understands martyrdom as an inherently nonviolent form of political resistance. As such, the book argues that classical martyr narratives in all three Abrahamic traditions ought to be reclaimed as theological resources for resisting political violence today. Returning to the scriptural roots of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thought in order to retrieve a theological understanding of martyrdom as *witness to God's actions in the world*, this book will demonstrate how this concept has been distorted to encompass the popular misconception of martyrdom as violence perpetrated by religious extremists. The goal is to reclaim the nonviolent dimension of martyrdom by analyzing pivotal moments of crisis for the Christian church – moments when the nonviolent Gospel collides with the realities of political violence – in order to articulate a public theology that offers political resistance to terrorism while rejecting violence. Furthermore, as a work of comparative theology, these moments of crisis within the Christian tradition are brought into critical discourse with analogous situations, *mutatis mutandis*, in Judaism and Islam in which the divine scriptural imperatives to preserve life and resist violence are challenged by theological justifications for political violence.

An analysis of the earliest Christian experiences of martyrdom establishes that from the Pauline corpus, to the earliest Gospel (Mark), through the later Johannine literature, the act of witnessing to God's revelation in Christ placed the early Christian community into conflict with the political and cultural status quo. If Christ is the model for the Christian life, and Christ's life is theologically understood as a "faithful witness" (Rev 2:13), then Jon Sobrino's Christological insight is particularly instructive – Christ was crucified because of how he lived his life as a witness to the truth.[12] For this reason, the Christian act of witnessing inevitably entails political consequences, and given that Christ's ministry is the paradigm for all Christian action, such praxis ought to be grounded in nonviolence. The way in which the church navigates the world as a witness to God's existence is a public act; accordingly, a faith community that produces martyrs (Greek *mártus* = "witness") presumes an ecclesiology in which membership in the body of Christ is inherently political. Consequently, any theology that seeks to depoliticize and spiritualize the Christian

[12] See Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 195–218.

understanding of salvation by excluding historical liberation is fundamentally in error.

Tertullian's observation that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church"[13] has a depth of meaning not obvious to contemporary believers. If we take Tertullian's metaphor seriously – that the blood of the martyrs is the life source of the church – we have to affirm that without the blood of the martyrs, i.e., without persecution and martyrdom, the church cannot live and grow. In other words, martyrdom is not an accident of history but a necessary component of Christ's redemption of humankind *as mediated through the church*. In today's political climate, martyrdom is viewed in overwhelmingly negative terms as primarily the actions of religious extremists willing to commit suicide for (what they view as) a noble and liberating cause, often in a manner designed to produce the greatest possible harm. Not surprisingly, the topic of martyrdom is often silenced within North American academic and ecclesial theologies by relegating it to the historical past or by minimizing its relevance, viewing it as a reality affecting Christians under repressive regimes in some far-off corner of the world.[14] While martyrdom is an actuality of global Christianity in our time, as evidenced by the persecuted church in China, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East, this investigation argues that martyrdom, as experienced by the earliest Christians, can and ought to serve as a model of Christian living *even* in the absence of direct religious or political persecution.

Martyrdom through the Lens of Liberation

A general contention of this investigation is the belief that within all three Abrahamic scriptural traditions, God's self-communication to all

[13] See Tertullian, "Apology," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers,* vol. 3, *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian,* three parts*: I. Apologetic; II. Anti-Marcion; III. Ethical*, trans. and ed. The Rev. Alexander Roberts, D.D., and James Donaldson, LL.D (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997 reprint), 55. The text actually reads, "The blood of the Christians is the seed" (*semen est sanguis Christianorum*), but popular usage and a close contextual reading justify this expanded translation. For a modern interpretation of this phrase, see Matthew Lundberg, "The Blood of the Martyrs Is the Seed of Life: Liberation Theology, Martyrdom, and the Prophetic Dimension of Theology", *Koinonia* 16 (2004): 1–28.

[14] In 2012, the Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame hosted an interdisciplinary conference entitled "Seed of the Church: Telling the Story of Today's Christian Martyrs" designed to raise awareness inside and outside the church about the widespread persecution of Christians around the world by demonstrating how persecution of Christians is one of the most common human rights violations in the world today (an estimated 100 million Christians are victims of severe persecution). Without minimizing the importance of this issue or the timeliness of this conference, this chapter merely contends that a theology of martyrdom is relevant for the Christian life even in a context free from persecution (http://icl.nd.edu/icl-events/seed-of-the-church/).

humankind contains a message of human liberation. Without reducing the mystery of God to human liberation, it is assumed and argued throughout that whatever else religious traditions say about God and God's relationship to humanity, an authentic scriptural theology cannot speak about God without advocating for God's justice, especially on behalf of the poor and powerless. To that end, a study of martyrdom in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam benefits from an engagement with recent theological reflection on the experience of martyrdom from the perspective of Latin American liberation theology.

In light of the political struggles in Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s, encapsulated by the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero in 1980, Catholic theologian Karl Rahner called for a broadening of the traditional concept of martyrdom.[15] Rahner challenged the church's dogmatic formulation of martyrdom as "the free, tolerant acceptance of death for the sake of the faith, except in the course of an active struggle as in the case of soldiers" because it excluded someone like Archbishop Romero from the ranks of the Roman Catholic Church's "official" list of martyrs and argues for a reconceptualization in which "a death suffered in active struggle for the Christian faith and its moral demands (including those affecting society as a whole) must necessarily and always be linked with the concept of martyrdom."[16] Today, more than three decades after Romero's politically motivated assassination (and despite the fact that the Roman Catholic Church has since canonized Franciscan political prisoner Maximilian Kolbe as a martyr), the process of canonization for Archbishop Romero inches forward all too slowly.[17]

Part of the controversy surrounding the canonization of Romero concerns the dogmatic definition of martyrdom as death arising from *odium fidei* – persecution and death motivated by a hatred of the Christian faith. Rahner, in his plea for a more inclusive doctrinal formulation of

[15] Karl Rahner, "Dimensions of Martyrdom: A Plea for the Broadening of a Classical Concept," *Concilium* 163 (March 1983): 9–11.

[16] *Ibid.*, 9.

[17] The process of beatification for Archbishop Romero, begun by the Vatican in 1994 but impeded by conservatives within the Holy See, was relaunched in 2013 by Pope Francis I. On February 3, 2015, Francis declared Archbishop Oscar Romero – who was assassinated by a right-wing death squad in 1980 while celebrating mass in El Salvador – *a martyr for the faith*, thereby clearing the way for his beatification (www.religionnews.com/2015/02/03/pope-francis-declares-oscar-romero-martyr-moves-slain-archbishop-toward-sainthood/). On May 23, 2015, Romero was beatified in San Salvador by order of Pope Francis I, bringing him one step closer to canonization. See Juan José Dalton, "Beatificado monseñor Romero ante 300.000 personas en San Salvador," *El País*, May 23, 2015, available at http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2015/05/23/actualidad/1432409201_139353.html (accessed December 20, 2015).

martyrdom, argues that someone like Kolbe or Romero, who dies in a struggle for social justice, is motivated by deep doctrinal commitments. Therefore, to narrowly insist that a martyr's death ought only result from persecution stemming directly from confessing Christ, or over some dispute over orthodoxy of doctrine, places undue constrictions on the benefits the church can gain from a martyr's witness, especially "for a Christianity and a Church that mean to be aware of their responsibility for justice and peace in the world."[18] Exploring a similar vein as Rahner, Latin American liberation theologian Jon Sobrino argues that a new historical reality demands a new and different understanding of martyrdom.

Consequently, Jon Sobrino distinguishes between (1) classical martyrdom, (2) "Jesus martyrs" like Oscar Romero who willingly embrace a life of solidarity with the poor and oppressed in a struggle against injustice and very often lose their life, and (3) the "crucified people," referring to the great masses of the poor and disenfranchised who are the anonymous victims of greed and political repression but who "do not actively give up their lives in the defense of the faith."[19] The latter category, the "crucified people," a term first coined by Sobrino's martyred friend and colleague Ignacio Ellacuría, has proven controversial.[20] When Sobrino lifts up the "crucified people," he is not just redressing a great historical injustice, he is also making a demanding theological assertion: "[W]hat we want to stress now is that the crucified peoples themselves are bearers of salvation."[21] According to Sobrino, the crucified people not only bear witness to Christ's redemptive suffering but also help to bring about salvation *through their own suffering*. Sobrino's attempt to give "meaning" to the deaths of the crucified people becomes problematic because it suggests that, from the perspective of divine providence, God intends or, at the very least, allows these "innocent" deaths to happen.

While Sobrino never states that it is God's will for innocents to suffer, it is implied in his use of Ignacio Ellacuría's definition of the crucified people as "the historical continuation of Yahweh's [suffering] servant."[22] Jon Sobrino has identified the crucified people as the most urgent theological concept for our age because it draws attention to the fact that "creation has

[18] Rahner, "Dimensions of Martyrdom," 11.
[19] Jon Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, Books, 2003), 132.
[20] See Ignacio Ellacuría, "The Crucified People," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J., and Jon Sobrino, S.J. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 580–603.
[21] Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom*, 160. [22] *Ibid.*, 157.

turned out badly for God."[23] By this he means that whether or not the world is viewed from a Christian perspective, it cannot be denied that the world is a place of great innocent suffering. Accordingly, Christian theology needs to reconcile the apparent contradiction between belief in a benevolent, all-powerful God and the existential reality of innocent suffering on such a grand scale. The appeal of liberation theology is that it takes seriously the suffering of the innocent by doing theology from the perspective of the crucified people. In other words, it rejects any attempt to understand innocent suffering as the will of God, and it makes sense of this suffering by claiming that God makes a preferential option for the innocent victims in order to overturn the historical forces that perpetuate oppression, poverty, and death. Yet, by emphasizing the passive martyrdom of the innocent masses over the active martyrdom of the "Jesus martyrs," Sobrino runs the risk of undermining the ethical imperative driving his entire liberative project. Emphasizing the victimization of the crucified people runs contrary to Gustavo Gutiérrez's conception of the world's poor as the new evangelizers whose struggle to end poverty and oppression reveals God's preferential option for the poor and challenges the church to walk in solidarity with the poor and oppressed.[24] The success of the Latin American liberation theology movement is in great part attributable to an awakening of the poor to the power they have as agents in human history.[25] The concept of the crucified people fails to convince, especially when applied to those who are not engaged in the work of liberation but are merely the victims of repression, because it is not adequately analogous to the martyrdom of Christ – or even the sacrifice of the "Jesus martyrs" – because it lacks the qualities of volition and moral agency characteristic of the classical paradigm of martyrdom.

Although bearing a greater similarity to Christ's death than the crucified people, the concept of "Jesus martyrs" is also controversial. Jon Sobrino

[23] *Ibid.*, 155.

[24] See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, rev. ed., trans. and ed. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 68–71.

[25] See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary edn., trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000). Freire develops the concept (adopted by liberation theologians) of *conscientização* (Portuguese) – conscientization or critical consciousness – to describe a complex interdisciplinary analysis of social and political realities that perpetuate unjust social structures and empower people, through education, to take action against the oppressive elements uncovered by that analysis. For an application of the concept of conscientization in an ecclesial context, see Pope Francis I, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World, November 24, 2013, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (accessed December 20, 2015).

defines Jesus martyrs as those "who die like Jesus because their lives, words, and praxis have been essentially . . . like those of Jesus. They suffer a violent death for being like Jesus . . . Jesus martyrs are not, strictly speaking, those who die *for* Christ or *because of* Christ, but those who die like Jesus and *for the cause of* Jesus."[26] Sobrino is insistent that this "does not mean that those who die for confessing their faith are not 'martyrs': they often are in an inspiring fashion."[27] However, in this present reality – here he speaks primarily about the struggle for liberation in Latin America but acknowledges similar situations in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East – martyrs are most often killed for political acts in solidarity with the poor and oppressed and not for defending the church or its creeds: "They have loved and defended the poor in life, as Puebla says that God himself does (n. 1142), and they have done so to the end, to death, and *without making use of violence*."[28] This investigation applauds Sobrino's rethinking of martyrdom but questions his categorizing the type of martyrdom prevalent in the early church as death due to *odium fidei*, whereas contemporary forms of martyrdom take the form of death due to *odium iustitiae*.

Acknowledging that the concept of the "crucified people" stretches the early Christian paradigm beyond recognition, Sobrino's argument is valuable for a comparative theology of martyrdom because it reclaims the political dimension of the early Christian experience of martyrdom. Still, by rethinking martyrdom in terms of a new historical reality – violence and repression of Christians *by other Christians* in the Latin American context – Sobrino gives impetus to the misconception that the early Christian experience of martyrdom was primarily a matter of confessional purity in the face of religious persecution. Given that so many modern martyrs – Maximilian Kolbe, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., Father Rutilio Grande, and Archbishop Oscar Romero, to name a few – faced death as a direct result of nonviolent political resistance against (nominally) Christian powers, it is extremely valuable to recognize that early Christian persecution existed in the context of public proclamation of the faith *as* an act of political resistance.

Revisiting Martyrdom in Classical Antiquity

Since the events of 9/11, martyrdom has become one of the most pressing issues in theology and religious studies, with new historical studies of

[26] Jon Sobrino, "Our World: Cruelty and Compassion," in *Concilium: Rethinking Martyrdom* (London: SCM Press, 2003), 19.
[27] *Ibid.*, 19. [28] *Ibid.*, 18–19 (emphasis added).