

CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE

In recent years, martyrdom and political violence have been conflated in the public imagination. Rubén Rosario Rodríguez argues that martyr narratives deserve consideration as resources for resisting political violence in contemporary theological reflection. 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. Christian, Jewish, and Muslim martyr narratives that condone political violence – whether terrorist or state sponsored – are examined alongside each religion’s canon in order to evaluate how central or marginalized these discourses are within their respective traditions. Primarily a work of Christian theology in conversation with Judaism and Islam, this book aims to model religious pluralism and cooperation by retrieving distinctly Christian sources that nurture tolerance and facilitate coexistence while respecting religious difference.

THE REV. DR. RUBÉN ROSARIO RODRÍGUEZ is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology in the Department of Theological Studies at Saint Louis University. His first book, *Racism and God-Talk: A Latinola Perspective* (2008), won the 2011 Alpha Sigma Nu Book Award for Theology. He has contributed to two recent collections, *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latinola Theology* (2015) and *Immigrant Neighbors among Us: Immigration across Theological Traditions* (2015), and is editor of the forthcoming *T&T Clark Companion to Political Theology* (2018).

CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE

A Comparative Theology with Judaism and Islam

RUBÉN ROSARIO RODRÍGUEZ

Saint Louis University



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In memoriam:
William H. Blake
Rubén Rosario Hernández

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Acknowledgments

The origins of this book date back to my doctoral studies at Princeton Theological Seminary as I prepared to take a written comprehensive examination in ethics on the possibility of a “common moral discourse” mere days after the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington. Those horrific events were witnessed by my sister-in-law, Kathy Blake, employed at Seven World Trade Center, from behind a newsstand at Ground Zero when the previously unthinkable happened and Two World Trade Center came crashing down. Suddenly John Rawls’s category of “public reason,” employed as a language and logic accessible to all people regardless of cultural context facilitating political debate seemed woefully naive and outdated. The overwhelming media perception was of religion as a force for terror and destruction, threatening the long, rich tradition of world religions as advocates for peaceful coexistence and cooperation. Worse, the specter of anti-Muslim backlash hung over the United States like a heavy storm cloud that well over a decade later has yet to dissipate. I have tried to bring my voice as a Christian within the Calvinist Reformed theological tradition to bear on these issues, firmly convinced that dialogue can give birth to hope, which might eventually yield a harvest of peace, but I am not writing solely for other Christians. This book is an effort by a Christian theologian to engage in meaningful conversations with Muslims and Jews on the topic of religiously motivated political violence in order to move beyond what divides us that we might stand together on those things that unite us.

The project began in earnest, however, with a course I designed and taught at Saint Louis University in 2009 on the Latin American martyrs, *La sangre de los mártires*. Unfortunately, work on the project was halted in 2011 when my son was diagnosed with T-cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia, necessitating 3½ years of intensive chemotherapy and care. By the grace of God, he completed all treatment successfully in January 2015, and all indications are that he has beaten the cancer, prompting my return to

the project on a full-time basis. Over the years, the project has grown and changed due in great part to the conversations taking place in the classroom, at professional conferences, and in local congregations. I particularly want to acknowledge Ladue Chapel in Ladue, Missouri, for inviting me to present a Lenten study on the early Christian martyrs and their relevance for contemporary spirituality in 2013, and Trinity Presbyterian Church, in University City, Missouri, for working its way through the book of the prophet Jonah with me over the course of three long sessions in 2014. It is always a humbling and rewarding experience to be called on as a “doctor of the church” in the midst of a living, breathing congregation rather than in the isolated ivory tower of academia.

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