

Religious culture | Book Review

# Martyrs to the cause

A defining tradition in both Protestant and Catholic Christianity

By Paula Fredriksen



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Catacomb saint Ignatius, exhibited at the Basel Museum of Cultures | © MLouisphotography/Alamy

## CULT OF THE DEAD

A brief history of Christianity

384pp. University of California Press. £27 (US\$34.95).

Kyle Smith

**G**risly torments. Hideous dismembering. Extreme self-mortification. Voluntary live entombment. The collection and even the theft of human body parts. The celebration of violent death. Such are some of the themes treated in *Cult of the Dead*. Yet reading this book conveys the feeling of bouncing over bumps at high speed on a sunny day in an all-terrain sports utility vehicle. How can such lugubrious topics provide so much fun? The tale is animated by the telling. With sly wit, subtle humour, agile prose and empathetic imagination, Kyle Smith narrates the growth of one of Christianity's defining traditions: its adoration of the martyr.

Smith's interest in the subject was ignited by chance, when he was introduced to a luridly illustrated catalogue of tortures. *Treatise on the Instruments of Martyrdom* featured spikes and swords, axes and arrows, weights and wheels. Composed in the sixteenth century and translated into English in 1903, this bibliographic find led Smith to contemplate the ways in which martyr cults affected Christian piety and politics, the economic development of the post-Roman West and the very measurement of time.

"Being killed is an event", Smith notes, quoting Daniel Boyarin. "Martyrdom is a literary genre." That genre was already enshrined in Christian scripture, with its narrations of Jesus's crucifixion in the gospels and of the stoning of Stephen in Acts. By the time that the New Testament was firmly canonized (in the early

fourth century, impelled by the newly converted emperor, Constantine), the age of the martyrs was, technically, past: pagans could no longer make martyrs of the faithful. How many actually suffered is unknown and unknowable: as late as the 240s, the great theologian Origen commented that their number could easily be counted (*Against Celsus* 3.8). Nor do we know much about the legal mechanisms that may have brought people to trial. Nor can we date martyrdoms with much security. What we do know is that stories about martyrs were tremendously popular. With Constantine's conversion their production bloomed.

For this, as Smith points out, we owe thanks in part to Constantine's contemporary Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea. The first to author a history of the church, Eusebius developed the narrative arc that controls public imagination and influences popular church histories to this day. In the beginning, so the narrative goes, there was darkness: violent and sadistic pagan persecutions; heroic defiance in defence of the faith. Christians were an underground movement, in this telling, always subject to threat. So brave were they when facing execution that pagan distaste gave way to admiration. Then, truly miraculously, at a moment poised before battle, Constantine committed to the Christian God. Thereafter, peace and unimpeded growth. The acts of the martyrs, in this view, had lit the pathway to history's happy resolution: the triumph of the church.

Martyr stories went on to shape time. They would be read aloud in communities, commemorating the day of a saint's trials and victories. Disagreements over the date of Easter - Christ's triumph over his own martyrdom - precipitated new calendrical calculations. Saints' days shaped the year, replacing older pagan feasts (December 25, the celebration of the god Sol

Invictus, the Unconquered Sun, would go on to have a long Christian future). Piety demanded ever more martyrs, which in turn generated huge lists of names with corresponding death dates. Martyrs' manifest presence at their tombs or within their sanctuaries worked exorcisms and cures. Celebrations ringed round shrines. Too often for the tastes of highbrow bishops, the faithful would rejoice raucously, imbibing more wine than the upper ranks thought necessary. More than simple piety prompted pilgrimage: sacred destinations offered a good time. "So popular were saints' lives", Smith notes, "that even tales about fictional travelers to a saint's shrine were a hit", pointing in evidence to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

Eventually, martyr's bodies would be partitioned and exported, as was the fate of St Stephen's bones, which were "discovered" near Jerusalem in 415. Even objects that had come into contact with these holy remnants would possess curative charisma. The ultimate holy commodity was any object that had touched Jesus's body (itself ascended into heaven): a splinter of the true cross, or a nail therefrom; his crown of thorns, the stimulus for building Paris's beautiful Sainte-Chapelle. Pilgrimage routes, trodden by the devout seeking contact with these marvellous relics, developed economies along the way - driving up demand for yet more relics. The holy dead crowded comfortably around those living with dread, disease and the devastations of the plague.

The birth of Protestantism put a dent in this sort of adoration: the martyrs' stories might have been elevating, but the commodification of relics had to stop. The Catholic Reformers responded to this challenge by doubling down. With the recovery of Rome's subterranean catacombs the church had a whole new cache of holy bones, many of which found their way to shore up Catholic faith in roiled German provinces. Fascination with the precise mode of

execution endured. (This was the larger historical context for the treatise on torture that stimulated Smith's research.) With the convulsions between Rome and England in the wake of Henry VIII's tumultuous marital history, a new round of martyrdoms occurred: Mary I (called "Bloody Mary" by her opponents), Henry's Catholic daughter, executed some 300 English Protestants. Thanks to Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, these people, too, joined the roll call of the holy dead. Martyrdom, it seems, was more ecumenical than were its perpetrators, or its victims.

There is so much more in Smith's book. Some of the details are quite dark. He depicts horrific extremes of mortification in desert asceticism, a form of self-martyrdom (since pagans could no longer oblige). His description of medieval female immuration - the liturgy for being walled up for life inside the structure of a church - is heart-stoppingly vivid, and sad. Indeed, Smith elegiacally entitles his chapter on this practice "The Living Dead". But for the most part Smith steers clear of shadows. The antisemitism that grows alongside these martyr stories in a narrative double helix is virtually ignored, as is the misogyny that was part and parcel of late antique and medieval male piety. Protestants and Catholics face off, but their fight is framed by duelling publications enabled by new communications technology (the printing press): Europe's thirty-year bloodletting from 1618 to 1648 goes unmentioned. All's well that ends well, which is to say, with Smith invoking the promise of final Resurrection.

Kyle Smith's goal, his subtitle notwithstanding, was not to write a history, but rather to distil scholarship "into an entertaining narrative for a general reader". That is exactly what he has accomplished, and accomplished well. *Cult of the Dead* is lively reading, traversing - for the most part, merrily - wide

swathes of our cultural terrain.

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