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REVIEW ARTICLE

Early Modern Martyrs

by THOMAS S. FREEMAN

Salvation at stake. Christian martyrdom in early modern Europe. By Brad S. Gregory. (Harvard Historical Studies, 134.) Pp. xvi+528 incl. 35 figs. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999. £30.95. 0 674 78551 7

Inspired by the example of Henry Walpole, an English Jesuit martyr (who had himself been converted by the example of Edmund Campion), Dona Luisa de Carvajal journeyed from her native Spain to preach the gospel in England. Martyrdom eluded her, but she was repeatedly arrested and died while awaiting repatriation to Spain. Julius Palmer, a Catholic student at Oxford, converted to Protestantism after learning the details of the martyrdoms of Ridley and Latimer; he was burned as a heretic in Reading in 1556. Joyce Lewes, another Protestant martyred in the same reign, undertook a public and fatal rejection of Catholicism after being impressed by the willingness of Laurence Saunders, who had been burned nearby, to die rather than accept Catholicism. Florimond de Raemond, who would become a prominent Catholic controversialist, temporarily converted to Protestantism after witnessing the high profile martyrdom of Anne du Bourg.

Through their martyrdoms, martyrs spoke to their contemporaries directly, powerfully and persuasively; the terse idioms of fortitude and sacrifice were understood across social, confessional, linguistic and geographic boundaries. Quintessentially mimetic (in Donald Kelley's lapidary phrase, martyrdom is '*imitatio Christi* with a vengeance') martyrdom inspired mimesis in observers; if imitation did not necessarily extend to immolation, it did foster zeal and confessional devotion. This meant, as Brad Gregory repeatedly observes, that martyrs also intensified the disagreements between the different confessions, making religious compromise vastly more difficult. (Martyrs had the same effect on politics and diplomacy. For example, Foxe's martyrology on one side, and

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Nicholas Sander's *De origine* and Richard Verstegan's *Theatrum crudelitatum* on the other, were enduring obstacles on the road to peaceful relations between England and other Catholic states; on one occasion Queen Elizabeth was so concerned about Verstegan's stories that she made a point of denouncing them to the French ambassador as wicked rumours.) As Gregory also observes, martyrs lent an almost inviolable authority to the doctrines for which they died, thus reinforcing both confessional boundaries and religious division by increasing confessional coherence and self-identification. (To extend Gregory's point a little, martyrs also became powerful weapons in the struggles to crush intra-confessional dissent. Calvin invoked the memory of his martyred followers against the Spiritual Libertines, Marian Protestants exploited the fact that their leading martyrs were predestinarians in controversies with radical Protestants over freewill and English secular priests and Jesuits snarled like mastiffs over a T-bone steak in their efforts to claim English Catholic martyrs for their respective causes.)

Yet despite their importance, the comparative study of Reformation martyrdoms and martyrologies has long been a neglected area. Although individual martyrs (for example Thomas More, Edmund Campion and Jan Hus) and individual martyrologists (especially John Foxe and Jean Crespin) have received scholarly attention, there has hitherto been no attempt to examine martyrdom across the confessional boundaries of Reformation Europe. An obvious reason why this has not been done is that the linguistic boundaries are even more numerous than the confessional ones. (This, however, is not an obstacle for Gregory who, as his notes demonstrate, is widely read in English, Dutch, German, French and Latin sources.) Another, and more important, problem is a modern privileging of toleration and moderation and a distaste for extremism, which has led to an academic marginalisation of martyrdom, with martyrs being regarded as part of the lunatic fringe, colourful and sensational, but peripheral to the religious mainstream. (The author of a recent, highly-regarded, study of popular religion in England, has boasted that his book focuses on 'the majority of England's inhabitants' and not on 'martyrs, "puritans" and spiritual misfits': Christopher Marsh, *Popular religion in sixteenth-century England*, Basingstoke 1998, 7. Yet if the majority of England's inhabitants were not martyrs, a substantial part of them read martyrological works, sang or listened to ballads about martyrs, gazed at representations of martyrs in various mediums, attended the executions of martyrs and, in numerous other ways, participated in a veneration of martyrs and martyrdom which lay near the heart of early modern religious life.)

In what may prove to be a controversial opening chapter, Gregory urges scholars to abandon anthropological and psychological theories when studying the Reformation as these are of no help in understanding

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sixteenth-century religious practices and practioners. Instead, he maintains, we should take at face value the statements of early moderns about their religious beliefs. In fact, Gregory states that he has chosen martyrdom as his topic because the concept forces scholars to try to understand people willing to die for divergent beliefs on their own terms (p. 11). Gregory's willingness to make hamburgers out of a herd of sacred cows is commendable. Much of what he says is true and all of it is a valuable corrective to the all-too-numerous efforts to impose fashionable, although irrelevant and often ahistorical, academic paradigms and theories on martyrs, martyrdoms and martyrologies.

But Gregory may go too far in the opposite direction by being overly positivist in his assessment of Reformation martyrs and martyrologies. Gregory underestimates the extent to which Henry Bull and John Foxe rewrote the letters of the Marian martyrs which they printed (pp. 23–4). In fairness to Gregory, much of the research demonstrating this remains unpublished and, since he cites other sources than those filtered through Bull and Foxe, it does not invalidate his argument about the general accuracy of martyrologies. (It does suggest that the martyrologies of Bull and Foxe may be less normative than they are usually assumed to be.) In my opinion, Gregory also underestimates the calculated self-presentation inherent in martyrdom and, in emphasising the martyrs' submission to God's will, he downplays their exercise of their own wills (see especially pp. 132–3). But these questions involve larger theological and moral issues which the readers of *Salvation at stake* will have to resolve for themselves.

In any case, there are at least two ways in which reviewers are likely to do less than justice to this remarkable book. One would be to engage exclusively in a debate with Gregory's positivist approach to Reformation studies and pass over the bulk of his book. The other would be to dismiss *Salvation at stake* as simply a survey, albeit a learned and useful one, of a neglected and important topic. Gregory has indeed covered a broad field with admirable lucidity, but he has also done much more; his penetrating analysis has changed our understanding of Reformation martyrs and martyrdoms.

Gregory begins by maintaining that there was a common perception and valorisation of martyrdom in western Europe during the later Middle Ages, something which has often been assumed but never before demonstrated in such convincing detail. (In fact, Gregory, throughout his book, consistently demonstrates what specialist studies on particular martyrs or martyrologists have assumed, but never been able to establish credibly: that a common martyrological culture permeated the different confessions, countries and regions of Reformation Europe.) Gregory goes on to argue that there was an essential continuity between late medieval concepts of martyrdom (reinforced by attitudes and practices which sublimated martyrdom such as asceticism, dying well and a devotion to

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Christ's passion) and martyrdom in the Reformation. The executions of Hus and then, later, the earliest Protestant martyrs, were fitted into an already well-established interpretive framework. This assessment is persuasive and it goes a long way towards explaining the ubiquitous veneration of martyrdom, as well as the common definitions of what constituted martyrdom, which were shared among all the Reformation confessions. But it may be that Gregory does not sufficiently emphasise the differences between ideals of martyrdom in the late Middle Ages and the Reformation, in particular the differences that arose from the revival of classical and patristic martyrological virtues, such as *apatheia* and the stoic endurance of suffering.

Gregory then examines the two fundamental aspects of this European Christian martyrological culture. The first is the willingness of sixteenth-century Christians to execute people for their religious convictions. Objectively and thoroughly, Gregory discusses the judicial mechanisms for prosecuting heresy and the theological beliefs which motivated prosecution by Protestants and Catholics alike. With equal skill and impartiality, Gregory then analyses behaviour even more alien to our century, the willingness of people to die for their religious convictions. Looking beyond the theological and scriptural imperatives for martyrdom, Gregory examines the ways in which the coreligionists of the martyrs guided and supported their readiness to sacrifice their lives for Christ.

Gregory then turns his attention away from the martyrs themselves on to these communities of fellow believers and the martyrological traditions they created. Gregory's research confirms his belief in the utility and validity of J.-F. Gilmont's tripartite scheme of distinct Protestant (i.e., Lutheran, Calvinist and 'Anglican'), Anabaptist and Roman Catholic martyrological traditions. He considers each of these traditions in a separate chapter. It is in these chapters that Gregory most profoundly alters current interpretations of Reformation martyrdom.

Generally historians have seen the 1550s as marking the real beginning of Protestant martyrology with the first martyrologies of Ludwig Rabus, Adriaen van Haemstede, Jean Crespin and John Foxe all appearing in that decade. Following Robert Kolb's seminal study of Rabus, historians have also regarded Lutheran martyrology as relatively inconsequential, with little impact on Protestant martyrology as a whole. Building on his premise of a widespread martyrological culture formed in the late Middle Ages, Gregory maintains that the early executions of unrepentant evangelicals created instantaneous cults of Protestant martyrs glorified in songs and pamphlets. In focusing attention on the Lutheran pamphlets, and in pointing out their number, frequent republication and wide circulation, Gregory has demonstrated an important Lutheran contribution to Protestant martyrology. (The point could be extended even

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further by considering the fact that these martyr pamphlets were important components of the martyrologies of Crespin, Rabus and Foxe.) This also suggests that Calvinism may have been less decisive in establishing a Protestant martyrological consciousness than many scholars have previously maintained.

Similar points emerge in Gregory's discussion of the Anabaptists. He argues that the medieval martyrological mentality once again prepared the way for early veneration of executed Anabaptists as martyrs. Because the majority of Anabaptists were illiterate and of humble social origin, for a long time their martyrs were not commemorated in print as their Protestant counterparts were; instead Anabaptists remembered them in songs and hymns. The existence of this martyrological consciousness among the Anabaptists confirms Gregory's description of a martyrological culture, going back to the Middle Ages, which penetrated to the grass roots of European society. It also further challenges the claims for a decisive Calvinist role in creating a Protestant martyrological mentality; clearly such a mentality existed far outside Calvinist ranks. Other fascinating aspects of Anabaptist martyrology, such as the struggles over the commemoration of martyrs from the disparate Anabaptist sects and the slow evolution of the great Anabaptist martyrology, the *Martyrs' mirror*, are described by Gregory in compelling detail.

The chapter on Catholic martyrology focuses on England, the European country which produced the overwhelming majority of Roman Catholic martyrs. Gregory depicts Catholic martyrology as responding tentatively to the Henrician martyrdoms but swelling in assurance and volume in the second half of the sixteenth century. He sees this as a consequence of national and ecclesiastical policies (the Dutch War, Pius v's excommunication of Elizabeth together with the execution of missionary priests as traitors in England and the Council of Trent) but this also raises the possibility that the effloresence of Catholic martyrology may have been a response to the effloresence of Protestant martyrology.

The organisation of *Salvation at stake* is generally excellent and the division into Protestant, Anabaptist and Catholic is as good an arrangement as any and better than most. It does, however, have the potential of militating against comparative study. (This problem is magnified by the HUP's incomprehensible decision to provide neither a bibliography nor to list modern authors in the index. As a result, using Gregory's book can be rather like using a breviary.) Gregory himself, if not his publisher, is aware of the problem and, in his final chapter, he skillfully weaves together the threads common to the three traditions to create a tapestry depicting the Reformation culture of martyrdom in its entirety.

Nevertheless some opportunities for comparion are missed. For example, while Gregory has useful discussions of Protestant veneration of

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the relics of their martyrs (pp. 175–6) and Catholic veneration of the relics of their martyrs (pp. 307–10), he does not compare the two. Nor does he discuss Anabaptist attitudes towards the relics of their martyrs. It may well be that there was no such Anabaptist veneration, but then that point itself is worthy of discussion. There are a number of tantalising observations throughout *Salvation at stake* on the influence of apocalyptic ideas on martyrology (for example, pp. 151–2 and 228), but this topic is never comprehensively discussed, although it is one of major importance. (The twin roles of John Bale as apocalyptic exegete and martyrologist are too well known to require comment, while John Foxe's commentary on Revelation was designed to be read together with his 'Book of Martyrs'.)

These observations are not made to deny, or even minimise, Gregory's achievement, but to underscore one vital aspect of it. His book is not the last word on the subject, but something far better: an indispensable aid for all students of early modern Europe and an adamantine and vast foundation on which specialists can build for generations to come. The best advice this reviewer can give about *Salvation at stake* to anyone interested, not only in martyrdom, but in the entire Reformation is to echo the words of St Augustine: 'Tolle lege'.

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