

Christian martyrdom in early modern Europe (sixteenth-seventeenth century)

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ABSTRACT

While Christian martyrdom is traditionally associated with Antiquity, it experienced renewed importance in Europe from the sixteenth century onward. First, religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants produced new martyrs, which each side publicized through images and print. Second, the Church's extension to a global scale offered new theaters for martyrs, in connection with persecution from pagan authorities, who were considered "barbarians." These accounts of martyrdom were also widely diffused, and enjoyed great success with the public, attesting to the permanence of a genuine culture of martyrdom in Europe. However, religious institutions—the Catholic Church in particular—were careful to control the designation of saints by theologically developing the notion of the martyr, namely by emphasizing the motivations underpinning it. This explains why the number of canonized martyrs during the early modern period remained low.



The Martyr of Nagasaki (1597) by Wolfgang Kilian, Augsburg (1628). Source :
Wikimedia Commons.

Martyrdom is an essential notion in the history of Christianity, although it can be found in varying forms and significations in other monotheisms. Within a single religious tradition, martyr figures are very diverse, and have prompted a number of reactions. They must be resituated in their context in order to understand how they were used, promoted, and even controlled by religious institutions. While the notion of martyrdom is firstly related to Antiquity and early Christianity, it assumed a new dimension during the early modern period due to two events:

the Reformation and the extension of Catholicity to a global scale.

The horizon of martyrdom at the beginning of the early modern period

The word martyr derives from a Greek word meaning “witness.” The term was used early on to designate victims of religious persecutions, who were killed for refusing to renounce their faith. These martyrs were identified as such by their community, thereby conferring particular value onto their death, which was the source of a specific kind of sanctity above all others. The persecution and diffusion of Christianity were closely linked since Antiquity. As Tertullian (ca. 160-220) stressed, “the blood of martyrs is seed for Christians.” However, in order to disqualify excessive behavior and the deliberate search for death, Saint Augustine (fourth century) pointed out that “it is not the punishment but the cause that makes the martyr.”

While opportunities for martyrdom gradually disappeared in late Antiquity and the medieval period due to the Church’s transformation of European society into a community of the baptized, martyrdom nevertheless remained a particularly valued form of sanctity, especially in hagiographical literature. There are many examples of martyrs in books of hours. Martyrs fill the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine (ca. 1230-1298), which was published in Latin in 1260, regularly reissued, and translated into numerous vernacular languages. It was one of the most widely read works in the sixteenth century, especially in lands of mission such as Japan, where it was adapted in 1591 under the title *Sanctos no gosagueo*. The early modern period was thus one marked by the “omnipresence of a culture and spirituality of martyrdom” (Isabelle Heullant-Donat and Charlotte Castelnau-L’Estoile).

The reactivation of martyrdom during the Renaissance: the impact of the Reformation and the extension of Christianity

Martyrdom once again became topical during the Renaissance, as part of the conflict opposing Protestants and Catholics. Each side celebrated its martyrs and established its own martyrological traditions. Protestants readily exalted the martyrdom of their coreligionists who had fallen under the blows of Catholics. For example, in 1554 Jean Crespin collected the *Acts of the Martyrs*, a work that was later expanded by the minister Simon Goulart. Crespin’s initiative had the support of Calvin himself. He situated Huguenot martyrs within the great historical narrative of Christianity, drawing a parallel between the martyrs of Antiquity and those of the Reformation, who were presented as the true witnesses of the Gospel. However, Protestants always sought to closely oversee the relation to martyrdom, and rejected the hagiographical tradition in particular: while the blood of martyrs deserved respect, it in no way justified worship, as was the case in the traditions of the Catholic Church. The latter was not to be outdone in constituting its own martyrology, for between 1566 and 1640 over fifty publications were partially or entirely devoted to the persecution of English Catholics, and were subsequently translated into other languages. The Church thought of itself as a besieged fortress in Europe, albeit one that was simultaneously extending toward new overseas Christianities.

The extension of the Church beginning in the late fifteenth century opened a new field for martyrdom. The desire for martyrdom became essential in the religious calling, as revealed by the *Indipetae*, letters in which Jesuits justified their wish to be sent on mission, especially in lands prey to persecution, such as Japan from the seventeenth century onward. This desire for martyrdom was maintained in the churches and seminaries of the Society of Jesus through paintings depicting the torture inflicted on missionaries, and through accounts of martyrdom read during meals. There was thus a genuine “theatralization” of martyrdom (Franck Lestringant), which was perceived in different ways by religious authorities.

Between the diffusion and control of martyrdom

With both Catholics and Protestants, martyrdom was used to facilitate religious propaganda, by underscoring the spread of missions prompted by these examples, in the tradition of Tertullian. The printing press played a decisive

role in accelerating the diffusion of accounts, and visual representations of martyrdom increased through engravings and illustrations. The case of the three Protestant martyrs in Brazil, precipitated in Rio de Janeiro bay in 1558 by the knight de Villegagnon, enjoyed coverage from publishing outlets in Paris and Geneva, which brought great publicity to the event. On the Catholic side, the torture of three Jesuits in Tyburn in 1581 was divulged in the ensuing months, with eyewitness accounts as supporting evidence. Similarly, with regard to overseas persecution, the arrival in Europe of relics from Japanese martyrs in the early seventeenth century was accompanied by a new publishing offensive, with the appearance of *De Christianis and Japonios triumphis* in 1623 by the Jesuit Nicolas Trigault (1577-1628). Each side was therefore careful to publicize accounts of martyrdom, which enjoyed great success with the public.

However, this promotion of martyrdom in Europe prompted concerns and warnings from religious authorities, especially on the Catholic side. Beyond the desire to preserve its troops, the Church was careful to avoid the excess sparked by a taste for martyrdom, following a tradition dating back to the medieval period. Beginning in the eleventh century, the Church sought to affirm its authority through stricter control over sanctity. This attitude endured and was even accentuated in the early modern period, with the Church contrasting the spontaneous worship of martyrs by the faithful with respect for the procedures of the canonization process, which was directed from 1588 onward by the Sacred Congregation of Rites. During the early modern period, only the Japanese martyrs of 1597 were beatified by Pope Urban VIII in 1627. It was not until the nineteenth century before most of the causes of early modern martyrs were opened and led to canonization.

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