

OPPOSING THE CLAIMS OF MAMMON

Biblical Reflections on the El Salvador Martyrs

Nicholas King

TWENTY YEARS AGO, six Jesuit priests, along with their housekeeper and her daughter, were brutally murdered in their home in San Salvador. The killing caused shock all over the world, yet it was not a complete surprise: Jon Sobrino SJ, their companion and the one whom many people think was the real target of the assassination, was not there that night; he was out of the country, but he and they had predicted that the dark forces would act in this way. They died because they had given their lives, and therefore, inevitably, their deaths, to the 'service of the faith that does justice'. In this article, I should like to argue that the killings are just one example of a necessary implication of monotheism. If there is one and only one God, then the claims of that God are paramount. If that is the case, then necessarily those claims are opposed to those of all the alternative deities that human beings set up for themselves.

Christian spirituality (including the spirituality of St Ignatius Loyola) has named three of these alternative gods as 'wealth', 'fame' and 'power', and they are apt representatives of the battle that monotheism has to fight; but almost any created thing can exercise a dangerously sovereign fascination over our attention. The One God firmly resists any such alternative sovereignty, not because the God of Jews and of Christians and of Muslims is a paranoid old tyrant, a King Lear among the gods, but because we human beings are so made that if we place anything that is not God at the centre of our attention, if we worship any created thing in place of the Creator, that necessarily throws our lives off balance, turns them in the direction of slavery rather than the freedom for which we are designed. We remember the

The Way, 48/4 (October 2009), 53–66

eight people who died, twenty years later, far more clearly than those who planned and carried out their deaths. They died (like far too many others down the ages) because they analyzed the unjust claims of Mammon,¹ and refused to bow down to that which is not God. Such a refusal and such an analysis are a potentially lethal option. Monotheism, and the struggle for justice which it entails, can seriously damage your health.

The Death of Rabbi Aqiba

A striking illustration of what this means comes in the tale told in the Talmud² of the death of a well-known Jewish martyr, the great Rabbi Aqiba, who died at the time of the Second Jewish Revolt (AD 132–135), and probably because of his involvement in it. He was an ambiguous figure for his fellow rabbis because of his support for Simeon bar Kokhba, the leader of the rebellion; but they regarded his death as a model for monotheists. He lived, of course, well after the New Testament period, and the Babylonian Talmud was not codified until the sixth century of our era; but the story aptly captures some of the implications of what it means to believe in the claims of one and only one God. Those claims are given gracious voice by devout Jews, both in his time and in ours, three times a day in the great prayer of the Shema ('Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one God ...').

R. Aqiba was on the point of dying³ under the tyrant Rufus, when the time came to recite the Shema. He started his recitation, and became utterly joyful. The proconsul shouted, 'Old man, old man—you must be a sorcerer, so the torments do not cause you to suffer! Or are you mocking me, showing your joy in the midst of your pain?' 'Calm down', said R. Aqiba, 'I am neither a sorcerer nor a mocker. All my life, I have read this verse of the Pentateuch, and I have always sadly asked myself, when will I experience the three ways of loving God indicated in the Shema, 'You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength'. I have shown that I love God with all my heart, and with all my strength; but I had not until now undergone the test of

¹ The Aramaic word for 'wealth', found in Mishnah and at Qumran. In the New Testament it is personified as anything that stands as an alternative to God (Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:9, 11).

² j. Talmud Berakot ix, 14b, and there is a shorter account at b. Talmud Berakot 61b.

³ According to the version in b. Talmud, the Romans were tearing his flesh with iron combs.

loving God with all my soul, as I am undergoing it at this moment ... I am happy that I am having the opportunity to demonstrate my faith'.⁴

The point here is that it is precisely in reciting the Shema that he makes sense of his death; and his death comes about because he will not accept any God, or any lordship, but one. There is a permanent tension between monotheism and the misplaced worship of any created thing (including the Roman empire or its emperor).

Monotheism and Martyrdom in the New Testament

That tension exists, of course, also in the New Testament, which remains resolutely monotheist, despite the fact that it is feeling its way towards a richer understanding of its own religious experience. That experience drove the New Testament authors, for all their robust Judaism, to recognise within the divine that invisible but deeply felt power to which they gave the name of the Holy Spirit, and to call Jesus, unmistakably a human being (he was born and he died), by the doubly subversive title of *Kyrios* or 'Lord'. The Christian witness to this rich oneness of God turned the Greek word for 'witness' into our word 'martyr': one who refuses to accept the claim of any Mammon at all. Interestingly the Roman chattering classes thought that the Christians must be 'atheists', because they believed in only one God.

The Book of Revelation

In some ways, the closest New Testament parallel to the martyrs of El Salvador is the witness⁵ of the Book of Revelation. The last volume of our New Testament,⁶ it was written under the persecution either of Nero⁷ or of Domitian,⁸ the last and maddest of the Flavian dynasty, in the last decade of the first century of our era. The actual dates of its composition do not here concern us, except in so far as they serve to set the text in its context. What comes across is the absolute refusal of the author, and presumably of the community for whom he was

⁴ The account in b. Talmud adds 'he prolonged the word *ehad* (One), until he died while uttering it'.

⁵ This word is not, of course, used lightly in this context.

⁶ Its positioning may reflect a certain discomfort on the part of church authorities with its determination to rock the boat.

⁷ Who died in June AD 68. His persecution of Christians is often dated to AD 64.

⁸ Emperor from AD 81–96, who insisted on being called *Dominus dominorum*, Lord of lords.



The Adoration of the Lamb, detail from the Ghent Altarpiece, by Jan van Eyck

writing, to acknowledge the claims of Rome, and in particular those of Rome's reigning emperor to be worshipped as an alternative deity. Rome is seen as the Antichrist, and the Great Beast as a parody of the Lamb (Jesus, the real Lord). In the same way the El Salvador martyrs resisted a regime that parodied the justice demanded by faith in the One God.

In chapter 7, the Elder John expresses in the following striking terms the subversive witness of Christians who refuse to serve Mammon. After the catalogue of the 144,000 from Israel who had been slaughtered, he offers a wider view, a liturgical assembly before God and Jesus in heaven of those from the rest of humanity who have gone this road of witness.

After this I saw, and behold, a great crowd, which no one was able to number it, for every nation and all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the Throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white raiment, and with palms in their hands. And they cry out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation to our God who sits upon the Throne, And to the Lamb'. And all the angels stood around the Throne and the elders and the four living creations; and they fell down before the Throne, on their faces, and they worshipped God, saying, 'Amen, Blessing and Glory and Wisdom and Thanksgiving and Honour and Power and Strength to our God, for ever and ever. Amen.' And one of the elders responded, saying to me, 'These who are clothed in the white raiment—who are they,

and where do they come from?’ And I said to him, ‘My lord, you know’. And he said to me, ‘These are the ones who come out of the Great Tribulation,⁹ and have washed¹⁰ their raiment,¹¹ and have whitened them in the blood of the Lamb. Because of this, they are before the Throne of God, and they worship God, day and night in God’s Temple. And the One who sits on the Throne shall pitch tent with them;¹² they shall not be hungry or thirsty any more, nor shall the sun fall upon them, nor any burning,¹³ because the Lamb who is in the middle of the Throne will shepherd them, and guide them by streams of living water,¹⁴ and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’ (Revelation 7)¹⁵

The vision is intended to give hope to those who are in danger of losing their lives to the claims of Mammon. To keep their faith alive, they are invited to join in the liturgical chant that the heavenly choirs are singing to the One God and to the slain lamb. This is worth remembering if you attend a performance of the *Messiah* at Christmas, and sing along with these subversive choruses: John is writing for Christians in Asia Minor undergoing life-threatening persecution at the hands of the Roman powers. Notice how naturally the Elder reaches for Old Testament quotations and allusions¹⁶ to make his point. If, like Jews and Christians and Muslims, you believe in One and only One God, then the other so-called deities will take their revenge; but the unshaken witness of the Jewish and Christian scriptures is that they do not and will not prevail.

A few chapters later Revelation returns to the theme, this time using the ‘witness’ word, which eventually turns into the English word ‘martyr’:

... the gentiles shall trample the Holy City for forty-two months; and I shall grant to my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth.

⁹ Daniel 12: 1.

¹⁰ Genesis 49: 11.

¹¹ Exodus 19: 10, 14.

¹² Ezekiel 37: 27.

¹³ Isaiah 49: 10.

¹⁴ Psalm 23: 2–3; Isaiah 49: 10.

¹⁵ Isaiah 25: 8; cf. Jeremiah 31: 16. All biblical quotations in this article have been translated by the author.

¹⁶ Some, but by no means all of which have been indicated in the foregoing footnotes. The reader is advised to consult the passages indicated.

These are the two olive-trees and the two lampstands, which are standing before the Lord of the earth. And if anyone wants to harm them, fire will come out of their mouth and devour their enemies. And if anyone wants to harm them, so that person must be killed. These have the authority to close up heaven, so that no rain may fall during the days of their prophecy. And they have authority over the waters, to turn them into blood, and to strike the earth with every plague, as often as they wish. And when they complete their witness, the Beast that comes up out of the abyss will make war on them, and will conquer them, and kill them. And their corpse shall be on the square of the Great City which is called (spiritually) Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified. And some of the peoples and tribes and languages and nations shall look at their corpse for three-and-a-half days; and they shall not permit their corpses to be placed in a tomb. And those who dwell on the earth shall rejoice over them, and make merry, and send presents to each other. Because these two prophets tormented those who dwell upon the earth. And after three-and-a-half days, the Spirit of Life entered in them; and they stood upon their feet; and a great awe fell upon those who beheld them. And they heard a great voice from heaven saying to them, 'Come up here'. And they came up to heaven in a cloud; and their enemies beheld them. And at that hour, there came a great earthquake; and one tenth of the City fell; and in the earthquake, seven thousand human beings were killed; and the rest became awestruck, and gave glory to the God of Heaven. (Revelation 11:2–13)

We notice here the function of the witnesses or martyrs. Like the martyred in El Salvador, they uttered God's verdict authoritatively; but, again like those martyrs, their authority did not preserve them from death. Their death, however, was not the end of the story. Although the Beast appeared to have succeeded in its aim, their end was linked to 'Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified'; and as their Lord was raised from the dead, so their deaths were not, whatever their enemies may have supposed, an end to the claims of the One God. As in Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones,¹⁷ 'the breath of life from God entered them', and they ascended to God. The One God is indeed a jealous God, and those who hear the call to witness will not be abandoned for ever; and so we recall the witness of the martyrs of El Salvador, and not those who brought about their deaths.

¹⁷ Ezekiel 37:1–14.



The Deaths of the Two Witnesses, from the *Douce Apocalypse*

A further point to observe here is the numerical code present in the first passage: the use of multiples and factors of seven—42 months, 1,260 days, $3\frac{1}{2}$ days, 7,000. Now seven, in biblical literature, is the number of perfection. It reflects Israel's great gift to the world of the seven-day week, of which the final, seventh day is to be given to this jealous God, but is also to be a day when the oppressed are to be free of their toil. So Jewish and Christian readers grasp, without having to be told, that both God's powerful claims and the obligation to look after the oppressed are in play here. Our weary imaginations need to be reminded of what the original hearers of the Book of Revelation would have known at once: the code is a statement that God is in charge, and that even the horrible deaths of the martyrs are very far from being the end of God's story.¹⁸

¹⁸ For an outstanding recent account of the difficult codes of Revelation, see Ian Boxall, *Revelation: Vision and Insight* (London: SPCK, 2002).

The Last Supper Discourse: The World's Hatred

This picture of the witness to the One God that inevitably turns into martyrdom can be found in many places in the New Testament; but just two passages from one of the Fourth Evangelist's more remarkable compositions, Jesus' word to the disciples on the night before he died, may serve to make the point. The first comes in the context of Jesus' image of himself as the True Vine, in which his followers must 'abide'.¹⁹

If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before [it hated] you. If you were from the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not from the world, but I have chosen you from out of the world, because of this, the world hates you. Remember the word which I spoke to you: 'A slave is not greater than his Lord'. If they persecuted me, they are also going to persecute you. If they kept my word, they are also going to keep your word. But they are going to do all these things to you because of my name, because they do not know the One who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would have no sin; but as it is, they have no excuse for their sin. The one who hates me also hates my Father. If I had not performed my works among them, which no one else has done, they would have no sin. But as it is, they have seen and have hated both me and my Father, so that the word may be fulfilled which is written in their Torah, that 'they hated me without cause'. When the Paraclete comes, whom I shall send you from the Father, the Spirit of Truth who comes from the Father, that One will bear witness about me. And you are bearing witness, because you were with me from the beginning. (John 15: 18–27)

This Last Supper discourse of Jesus is addressed to a tiny group, huddled together against the night that oppresses them from outside; hanging over them is what may be called the 'Sad Question': how can we survive without Jesus? Our passage sketches an answer, which is to be located in the rich oneness of God, in whom is to be found the Father who sends, but also the Son who speaks and the Spirit of Truth who bears witness in the world. That 'world' in the fourth Gospel nearly always points to the forces of earthly power arrayed against the one God in a fight to the death, and to the sharp division between those who do and those who will not accept the demands of this jealous God.

¹⁹ John 15: 1–8.

This is the context in which we are to hear Jesus say that ‘a slave is not greater than his Lord’. At one level, it is a statement of the obvious; at another, it is a deeply subversive remark. For the empire that was about to do its worst to Jesus was built on various kinds of relationship between lords and slaves, patrons and clients; and Jesus here uses that language to describe the quite different relationship between him and his followers, slaves of the One God. The empire’s institutions dealt out death and captivity: but Jesus brings freedom and life. There is a profound tension between the two sides, the two ways of understanding slaves and lords; and the tension will end in murder. Those who refuse to sit on the fence, but side explicitly with ‘the faith that does justice’ will feel the full effect of that tension. Their ‘witness’ will indeed be a martyrdom. Why would they continue to bear witness? Because inside them they experience the word of the *paraclete*, the Fourth Evangelist’s great gift to Christian thinking about the One God.



Christ Taking Leave of His Apostles, by Duccio di Buoninsegna

That is what the witnesses of El Salvador, and of other places, felt at the deepest level of their being.

The Last Supper Discourse: The Paraclete

The paraclete appears primarily in chapters 14–16 of John's Gospel.²⁰ Our next text locates the jealous claims of the One God precisely in the complex reality that John sees in that One God, and one of the ways the author points to that complexity is by his use of the word 'paraclete' (παράκλητος), a word that means something like 'comforter', or, better, 'counsel for the defence'.

I did not say this to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to the One who sent me; and none of you asks me 'Where are you going? But because I have said this to you, pain has filled your hearts. But I am telling you the Truth: it is to your advantage that I go away; for unless I go away, the Paraclete will not come to you. But if I go, I shall send [the Paraclete] to you. And when [the Paraclete] comes, [the Paraclete] will prove the world wrong about Sin, about Justice, and about Judgment. About Sin, because they do not believe in me; about Justice, because I am going to the Father, and you no longer behold me; and about Judgment, because the Ruler of this world is hidden. (John 16: 4–10)

The witnesses of El Salvador, whom we are commemorating, and those countless others who have died for 'the faith that does justice' could make this text their own. The context is that of the One who sends, the One who is sent, and the One whom the Fourth Gospel calls the 'paraclete'. But three Ones here do not make three, but only one, because in this three there is no rivalry, but a unity of purpose which is also accessible to those who are prepared to witness to the Truth about the claims of the One God. They are prepared to bear the grief that is the consequence of that witness, and to prove 'the World' (the forces that are opposed to God's project) wrong about justice. We are dealing here with the reality of suffering that is an inevitable consequence (or at any rate not a sign of having made some kind of mistake) of insisting on placing God, and not Mammon, at the centre of our lives. The El Salvador martyrs bear witness to this reality.

²⁰ John 14: 16, 14: 26, 15: 26 and 16: 7.

Jesus and the Shema

This absolute demand of the One God to live the ‘faith that does justice’ demands unflinching acceptance of what really matters. The Shema that R. Aqiba triumphantly uttered as he died is what Jesus placed as his priority, along with the logically coherent insistence on treating human beings, made in the image and likeness of God, as ends in themselves. This is the implication of our final text.

And coming forward, one of the scribes, hearing them arguing, seeing that he had answered them nicely, asked him, ‘What is the No. 1 commandment of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘No. 1 is: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One Lord, and you are to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your understanding, and with all your strength”. No. 2 is this: “You are to love your neighbour as yourself”. There is no other commandment greater than these.’ And the scribe said to him, ‘Nicely, teacher! It’s true, what you say, that “He is One, and there is no other but He”, and that “to love him with all your heart and all your understanding and with all your strength” and “to love the neighbour as oneself” is far more than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.’ And Jesus, seeing that he had answered with understanding, said to him, ‘You are not far from the Kingdom of God’. And no one had the nerve to interrogate him further. (Mark 12:28–34)

It is important to recall the context of this eminently Jewish assertion of the oneness and uniqueness of God. We are in Jerusalem, and the way to the city has in recent chapters been punctuated by three predictions by Jesus that he is to die there. He has arrived, and has performed the prophetic gesture that we call the ‘cleansing of the Temple’, which, as far as Mark is concerned, is what was to lead directly to that death. The religious establishment (those who are threatened by anyone who speaks a prophetic word about the *status quo*) then raise with him the question of authority.²¹ This starts a series of episodes in which the tension becomes increasingly acute. Jesus refused to answer the question (but the reader is well aware that he is acting on God’s authority); and he turns the tables on the establishment by telling against them the parable of the Vineyard. In

²¹ Mark 11:28.

doing so, he picks up Isaiah's aggressive 'song of the vineyard',²² which (as the elders will not have needed to be told) was all about the assertion of God's absolute claims over against Israel's rebellion. As Jesus retells the story, he is reading off his own death, which is by now inevitable, as an offence against the just claims of God. This kind of analysis is, of course, exactly what the El Salvador Jesuits had been doing in their work at the University of Central America, siding deliberately with the poor against the authorities, exposing the idolatry of Mammon and therefore bringing their own deaths closer.

This dramatic parable is followed by a series of controversies. First come the Herodians and the Pharisees. We have already seen them hunting together in Mark's Gospel;²³ but they were unlikely bedfellows, since the Herodians' interest lay in preserving the alliance with Rome and Herod's status as a client king, while the Pharisees wanted to set up a pure society into which the Messiah might come. But the two establishments, political and religious, had a common interest in getting rid of this dangerous man. Jesus effortlessly turns back upon them their lethal question about the poll-tax, and is then addressed by a third establishment group, the Sadducees, the conservative hierarchy whose vested interest was in the Temple, which Jesus had attacked in such a prophetic vein. They too are easily rebuffed, with an entirely characteristic piece of creative exegesis on Jesus' part.

The next person to arrive on the scene is 'one of the scribes'. We just *know* that there is going to be trouble: here is a fourth establishment figure, coming to continue the attack; and it sounds at first as though this is indeed the case, for the question that the scribe puts could be a very dangerous one. There were 613 commandments, positive and negative, in the Torah, and you could get into deep theological water by selecting one as the most important. We hold our breath as we wait for Jesus' answer; but he has no hesitation at all, and singles out two: first, the love of God (quoting the Shema in order to make his point), and second (although he had only been asked for one commandment), the love of fellow human beings. To our astonishment, the scribe's response is not to engage in polemics, but to offer congratulations, taking up Jesus' citation of the Shema and of Leviticus ('love your

²² Isaiah 5: 1–7.

²³ Mark 3: 6.

neighbour as yourself'), and even adding in a further allusion of his own, from Hosea.²⁴ Two potentially clashing worlds encounter here, and we relish the wholly unexpected meeting of minds as Jesus tells the scribe, 'You are not far from the Kingdom of God'. And we can understand it when Mark makes his own judgment on the scene: 'no one had the nerve to interrogate him further'.

This is a rare moment of unanimity with the religious establishment at this stage of the Gospel, but Jesus does not let it rest there: instead he goes on the attack against scribal exegesis regarding the identity of the Messiah,²⁵ and against scribal attitudes:

... they want to stroll around in lace surplices, and get recognition wherever they go, and the front seats in church, and the best table in restaurants. And they gobble up widows' houses, and pretend to go in for long sessions of prayer. They will get the most serious condemnation. (Mark 12:38–40)

We wonder where Jesus' new-found friend stands in all this. But the time has come and gone for being diplomatic: the battle-lines are drawn and death is on its way. The One God cannot tolerate any rivals (they do not exist, or not as gods), and there are times when we have to make our stand, whatever the consequences. Jesus is still going to die, as will at least some of those who bear witness to him, because they have borne witness; but the final victory belongs to God.

One God

There is, then, one and only one God; and human beings are created in God's image and likeness. If that is so, then it follows that we must make God's claims paramount; injustice is a form of idolatry, in that it puts that which is not God at the centre of a life and, like other forms of idolatry, it is out of the question. This is first, because they do not achieve what their adherents hope for from them, and second, because they do violence to the basic structure of the universe and to our deepest human nature. Injustice involves treating other human beings as means and not ends, and Judaism and Christianity (and Islam) are going against their own best principles if they do not place at the top of

²⁴ Hosea 6:6.

²⁵ Mark 12:35–37.

their priorities first, the wholehearted love of God, and second, the love of our fellow human beings. In the case of Christianity, there is the added twist that Jesus (and no other potential rival) is Lord; and that means that his claims are absolute. That is the truth to which the martyrs of El Salvador in 1989 bore witness in their living and in their dying.

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