FRIDAY'S CHILDREN

A Reflection upon Contemporary Martyrdom

Michael Kirwan

I WOULD LIKE TO BEGIN with three scenarios or *vignettes* of martyrdom: two of them from the early Church, and one from recent cinema (though based on true events). They are the testimonies, respectively, of a laywoman, a bishop and a priest. The first example is from the prison diary of Vibia Perpetua; assuming this document is genuine, it is the earliest written testimony we have from the hand of a Christian woman. Perpetua was 22 years old, well educated, and newly married with an infant child; while still a catechumen, she was arrested with four companions in Carthage in AD 203. In her testimony she writes of how her father urged her to recant her faith and avoid execution, and of how she responded:

> 'Father', I said, 'Do you see this vessel lying here, a water pot or whatever it may be?'
>
> 'I see it', he said.
>
> 'Can it be called by any other name than what it is?'
>
> 'No', he answered.
>
> 'So also I cannot call myself anything else than what I am, a Christian.'[1]

About fifty years later, and also in Carthage, Bishop Cyprian was similarly condemned to death. He had returned to the city from exile in AD 258, in full knowledge that a death sentence had been pronounced on bishops, priests and deacons. Cyprian insisted that if he

[1] 'The Passion of Perpetua', in *Acta of the Christian Martyrs*, edited by Herbert Musurillo (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1972), 106–131.

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was to be prosecuted, he should be arrested in his own episcopal see, as he explained in his final letter to his congregation:

> It is proper that the bishop should confess the Lord in that city in which he presides over the Church of the Lord, and that thus he symbolize the entire people in the confession of their superior standing before them. For whatever the bishop as a confessor says at the moment of his confession by the inspiration of the Lord, he speaks for the mouth of all. Moreover, the honour of our ever-glorious Church will be foreshortened if I as a bishop presiding over another Church, should at Utica receive my judgement for my confession, and should go forth from there to the Lord as a martyr .... It is for this reason that here we await in seclusion the return of the proconsul to Carthage, to learn from him what the emperors have ordained with regard to the Christian laity and bishops, and then to say whatever the Lord will have us say in that hour.[2]

My third example is a fictional retelling of a true story. In *Shooting Dogs* (2005),[3] a harrowing film about the Rwandan massacres of 1994, John Hurt plays a Roman Catholic priest named Fr Christopher, who finds himself trapped in a school compound with several thousand Tutsi villagers. As the UN troops prepare to withdraw, it becomes evident that these people face death at the hands of their erstwhile neighbours, who are waiting outside the compound with machetes and clubs. The troops are powerless to help, even when the villagers ask them to shoot their children so as to spare them from being butchered. On being repeatedly told that the troops are there as monitors only, and have no mandate for peacekeeping, Fr Christopher explodes: 'Might I suggest that you get in touch with your superiors and change your fucking mandate!'

Like Bishop Cyprian, Fr Christopher chooses to remain with his people; his decision not to join the departing convoy costs him his life. The Eucharist that he celebrates with the villagers as they await their destruction takes on unbearable poignancy. The patient gathering of the vicious mob 'beyond the gates' can be seen as a diabolical parody of the eucharistic gathering inside.[4] With this contrast, the logic of the

[2] 'The Acts of Cyprian', in *Acta of the Christan Martyrs*, 169–175.
[3] In the USA this film was titled *Beyond the Gates*.
[4] It recalls the work of the theologian W. T. Cavanaugh, who writes of the Eucharist as a resistance to the 'anti-liturgy' of torture in Pinochet's Chile. See W. T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

***John Hurt as Fr Christopher in* Shooting Dogs**

eucharist is revealed: Jesus gave himself lovingly to his friends at the Last Supper before being handed over to be tortured and executed. As we are reminded in John's Gospel, it is the way of 'the world' that the Father's loving initiative in sending Jesus, his Son, provokes violent refusal; and yet God's own response to this refusal is to renew the invitation, even in the face of rejection. While they were at supper, Jesus showed the depth of his love, by loving to the very end.

My aim here is to attempt an overview of the contemporary theology of martyrdom, as a contribution to understanding more fully the lasting significance of the murders of Ignacio Ellacuría and his Jesuit and lay companions at the University of Central America (UCA) in San Salvador on 16 November 1989. Unlike so many of those killed during the Salvadorean civil war, these victims have left a powerful written testimony: Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (probably the intended victim of the assassins, though he was out of the country on the night of the killings) collaborated together on significant themes of liberation theology.[5]

[5] See Ignacio Ellacuríía and Jon Sobrino, *Mysterium Liberationis* (New York: Orbis, 1994 [Spanish original 1990]); also Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Burns and Oates, 1993 [Spanish original 1991]), 254–271, for further references to Ellacuría on the 'crucified people' of Latin America.

The term 'martyr' means 'witness', and the above examples, from third-century Carthage to the present, show us something of what a martyr's testimony has involved. It speaks of a fixed identity and a thoroughgoing commitment, as Perpetua argues, even before she has been baptized. It is ecclesial: Cyprian insists that he must be with his flock in his home see when he lays down his life. W. T. Cavanaugh writes:

> For the church itself, martyrdom disciplines the community and helps it to claim its identity … martyrdom recalls into being a people, the people of God, and makes their life visible to themselves and to the world. They remember Christ and become Christ's members in the Eucharist, re-enacting the body of Christ, its passion and its conflict with the forces of (dis)order …. The body of the martyr is thus the battleground for a larger contest of rival imaginations, that of the state and that of the church. A crucial difference in these imaginations is that the imagination of the church is essentially eschatological; the church is not a rival *polis* but points to an alternative time and space, a mingling of heaven and earth.[6]

If martyrdom, as Cavanaugh says, 'makes the Church visible', it does so by making Christians radiant like Cyprian, Perpetua, Fr Christopher and, twenty years ago, Ignacio, Segundo, Ignacio, Juan, Amando, Joaquín, Julia Elba and Celina—as they all call upon the powers of this world to 'change your mandate'.

What Is a Martyr?

Martyrdom is the most fundamental form of Christian political engagement. The martyr exposes the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of the ruling powers—and it is this exposure that brings about his or her death. The introduction of Paul's letter to the Romans, with its imperial greeting addressed to Christ, has been read as a triumphant declaration of war against the Roman State;[7] Augustine's *City of God* similarly shows up the iniquity of the Roman lust for domination which forms the politics of the 'earthly City'.

This stance of resistance towards the falsity of civic religion has been articulated by Latin American liberation theologians, for whom

[6] Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 64–65.

[7] See Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, translated by Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004), 16.

the crucial religious choice lies not between belief and atheism, but between 'the God of life and the idols of death'.[8] Just as the earliest Christians exposed the spiritual nakedness of the Roman Empire, so contemporary martyrs, in Latin America and elsewhere, have touched or uncovered the 'idols of death', which are instantiated above all in the 'National Security' state and in the systemic injustices of global capitalism. Martyrs are, so to speak, the ground troops who bear the fire of a cosmic political confrontation, witnessing to the possibility of a new and exceptional change of regime. The martyr's death is never an accidental by-product of social, political or religious conflict; rather it is at the very heart of that conflict.

Confessors and Martyrs

A helpful typology here is the distinction between 'confessor' and 'martyr'. The earliest martyrs,

> … would not proclaim that they were martyrs, nor would they allow us to call them by that name …. For it was their joy to yield the title of martyr to Christ alone, who was the true and faithful witness.[9]

Gradually, however, a distinction emerged, between those who have made an oral testimony which has led to their condemnation (confessors), and those who have directly sacrificed their lives (martyrs). In his book *Christopraxis: A Theology of Action*, the political theologian Edmund Arens makes a creative use of these two terms on the basis of the 'communicative action theory' of Jürgen Habermas. Habermas asserts that politics is best understood as the drive towards consensus which is implicit in all our attempts to communicate with each other. When we seek to persuade, to provide rational arguments for our point of view, it is because we believe that agreement is possible and desirable. Of course, all too often our communications are distorted or manipulative; even so, the drive towards consensus is primary and fundamental. Arens gives a theological application to this when he suggests there are two basic actions of faith, *witnessing* and *confessing*.[10] The witness is one who *seeks* to persuade in some way, to achieve a consensus or agreement where

[8] For an overview of this important theme, see Jon Sobrino's 'Excursus' on the Question of God, in *Jesus the Liberator,* 180–192.
[9] 'The Martyrs of Lyon and Vienne', in *Acta of the Christan Martyrs*, 83.
[10] Edmund Arens, *Christopraxis: A Theology of Action* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

harmony is absent. By contrast, confession occurs when the Church has *achieved* a consensus and speaks from it.

Arens further delineates four types of 'witnessing': kerygmatic-missionary (preaching the gospel); diaconal (putting oneself at the service of others, especially the weak and vulnerable); prophetic (protesting against dominant relations and the injustice of idolatrous powers); and witness through suffering—persecution, imprisonment, torture, death—which culminates in martyrdom. 'Confession' is a collective action which expresses the consensus of the Church, and which takes three forms: worship; instruction (for example catechesis); and situational confession—'an act of confession in an explosive situation in which a position is taken and a side is chosen unambiguously'.[11] Examples of this latter form of confession would include the Barmen Theological Declaration (1934) which expressed Christian opposition to Hitler, and the Kairos Document of South African Christians opposing apartheid in 1985.

For Arens, following Habermas, consensus is the key: all human communication, including the witness and the confessing of the Church, is either an attempt to arrive at consensus or an expression of an agreement which has been achieved. It is fascinating and moving to look at the struggles of the martyrs from this perspective. We have heard Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, declare that 'whatever the bishop as a confessor says at the moment of his confession by the inspiration of the Lord, he speaks for the mouth of all'. Another example, highlighted by William T. Cavanaugh, is Archbishop Oscar Romero's brave and controversial decision to cancel all the Sunday Masses in El Salvador that coincided with the funeral of the murdered Jesuit priest Rutilio Grande and his companions.[12] The funeral Mass at the cathedral in San Salvador was broadcast on the radio to the nation—including Romero's homily denouncing the violence of the military. Romero's decision can be seen as an anguished attempt to turn his own individual act of witness—prophetic denunciation—into a communal act of 'situational' confession, through which the divisions of the Salvadorean hierarchy would be overcome and the Church

[11] Arens, *Christopraxis*, 139.

[12] Rutilio Grande was the first of El Salvador's Jesuit martyrs. He was shot on 12 March 1977 along with two companions.

The Oscar Romero memorial centre in San Salvador

would speak with one courageous voice. Finally, there are the countless astonishing expressions of forgiveness from victims and their families towards those who have torn their lives apart, including the gestures of reconciliation from the Jesuit colleagues of the UCA victims—made while still insisting that justice is an imperative.

As we shall see, another theologian, Rowan Williams, also draws on the notion of 'witness' (testimony) in order to understand some of the tensions in contemporary political theology. A reason commonly given for the deaths of all the Salvadorean martyrs, not just of Romero, is that they 'told the truth'. Romero is respected for his promise never to lie to the people,[13] and his death follows those of Jesus and John the Baptist, who were killed for truth-telling (once again, a Johannine reading offers itself: note the importance of the Jesus as the 'Truth' in the Fourth Gospel, while Satan is the 'Father of Lies'). The reason for this emphasis, Jon Sobrino claims, is that structural injustice of the political and economic system maintains itself by misrepresentation. So the truth for which one is killed is far from being an abstract principle.

[13] Anna Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000), 123–124.

Re-evaluating Martyrdom

A central contention here is that the shooting of Oscar Romero on 24 March 1980 introduced a new kind of martyr, one whose political involvement in some respects did not fit the Church's classical pattern, or even criteria, for martyrdom.[14] Simply put, Romero was not killed because he was a Christian, but because he possessed a particular kind of Christian awareness. This atrocity, and the suffering of the Latin American Church in general, impelled the call for a new and expanded understanding of martyrdom, and in 1983 a volume of the international theological journal *Concilium* appeared entitled 'Martyrdom Today'.[15] The collection included an important essay by Karl Rahner, as well as contributions from other prominent theologians, including liberation theologians such as Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino. Briefly, the contributors wanted to put the question as to whether a Christian could be martyred in the struggle for justice rather than in defence of the Christian faith narrowly conceived; and as to whether the Church should continue to insist that someone involved in an armed struggle could not be classified as a martyr.

Whether a Christian could be martyred in the struggle for justice

Rahner's 1983 article is not the first time he had written on martyrdom. In a book entitled *On the Theology of Death* (1961) he had put forward a 'supra-sacramental' understanding, whereby martyrdom is seen as 'the highest achievement, the most complete abandonment of self, the pure grace of the Crucified … a death which can expose its dark, veiled essence to us' and enable us to know the truth about how an individual dies in faith.[16] Once again the question of the Church's visibility comes into play:

> Divine power must overcome the cleavage between man's existence in the eyes of God and his existence in the eyes of the world, between the supra-historical truth and the historical appearance, between the interior spirit and the empiric fact. That which here appears—the dying with Christ in God—must manifest what really is …. Martyrdom discloses the essence of Christian death, the death

[14] Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion*, 98–102.
[15] In a another dedicated edition of *Concilium* in 2003, twenty years later, the journal revisited the theme of contemporary perspectives on martyrdom.
[16] Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, volume 2 of *Quaestiones disputatae* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), 104–105.

> through free faith, which character would otherwise be hidden under the veil of ambiguity which obscures all human events.[17]

As Rahner himself seems to have recognised by the time he came to write the 1983 article, this vision of martyrdom as a 'supra-sacrament', is optimistic. By 'supra-sacrament' he means a context or situation 'where the sign will be absolutely true and the truth absolutely signified'.[18] There is to be no gap between the unseen spiritual reality (the martyr's faith) and its visible expression (the martyr's death). However, the lived historical reality of persecution and violence is very rarely this transparent. Rahner had come to acknowledge the complexity of witness in the contemporary world, not least in the case of political martyrs who resist situations of injustice, sometimes by means of armed struggle:

> In contrast to the tradition, he rejects any 'precise conceptual and verbal apartheid' between the two kinds of death, active and passive. Death, even on the battlefield, always involves an inward and outward powerlessness. Just like the traditional, passive martyr, the Christian warrior imitates Christ in his or her helplessness before evil. It is here, in the explicit reflections of political and liberation theology, that we come closest to the possibility of a transformed understanding of Christian martyrdom. If this line is followed, however, it takes us closer towards the militant *jihadi* understanding which has come to the fore in Islamism.[19]

Learning to Fail

We have mentioned above that Rowan Williams also has recourse to the notion of 'witness' or testimony, which he invokes as means of opposition to cultures that have lost a sense of their own fallibility: that have forgotten 'what it is to *fail*'.[20] Such a culture, says Williams, ceases to be a source of power for political agency. It therefore becomes necessary to imagine an alternative account of political action, one

[17] Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, 109.
[18] Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, 111.
[19] Michael Kirwan, 'Girard, Religion, Violence, and Modern Martyrdom', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 916, quoting Karl Rahner, 'Broadening the Concept of Martyrdom', reprinted in *Witnesses to Faith? Martyrdom in Christianity and Islam*, edited by Brian Wicker (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 147–150, here 149.
[20] Rowan Williams, 'Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose', in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology* (London: SCM, 2007), 63.

which can bring about a 'state of affairs other than the uncritical social order'. This action will have the character of 'witness'. The theme recurs in another passage:

> … the fundamental requirement of a politics worth the name is that we have an account of human action that decisively marks its distance from assumptions about action as the successful assertion of will.[21]

What does Williams mean by this? He seems to be insisting that a genuine politics needs to remain open to the transcendent, to be receptive to what is beyond or outside the present. Any claim by a regime to close off the political order and declare its own self-sufficiency is idolatrous, and must be resisted—whether this be the civic religion of the Romans (the emperor-worship which the first Christians refused), or the Nazi projections of a 'thousand-year Reich', or even the 'end of history' which was complacently proclaimed by the West after the fall of communism in 1989. Also in this category, we must include the idolatry of the oppressive state against which the liberation theologians protested. In each of these cases, the existing order is 'a system that has forgotten how to fail, a system that guarantees successful performance'.[22] Politics must be about more than simply the assertion of a particular will: Williams puts it strongly when he says that this points to 'the spectre of purest fascism'. The only antidote to such barbarism, he asserts, is the 'suspension' of this existing order, by an alternative understanding of action as *testimony*—of which the 'supreme act' is 'the instantiation of the supremely generative and revisionary act of all human history: the Cross for Christians, the gift of Torah and communal identity for Judaism'.[23]

States of Exception

Perhaps the clearest current example of what Williams is saying about uncritical state power is contained in the now considerable literature around the theme of the 'State of Exception', associated with the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, and with his book of the same

[21] Rowan Williams, 'Introducing the Debate: Theology and the Political', in *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*, edited by Creston Davis and others (London: Duke UP, 2005), 1.
[22] Williams, 'Between Politics and Metaphysics', 63.
[23] Williams, 'Introducing the Debate', 3.

name.[24] Agamben and others wrestle with the contradiction that states which profess to be governed by the rule of law can only survive by creating pockets of 'exception'—lawlessness—for which the law must nevertheless allow. Such has always been the case, of course: every society will introduce exceptional or emergency measures in the event of wartime, for example, by which the normal state of affairs is 'suspended'. What is of concern in the contemporary context, however, is the innate tendency within liberalism to engender permanent 'exceptional' measures in the name of a continuous emergency. 'States of exception' too readily become the norm, as is evident from the current 'war on terror' in the West, in which temporary restrictions upon liberty and upon citizens' rights have become a permanent fixture. The examples of Guantánamo Bay and the practice of extraordinary rendition of suspects for torture come to mind as examples of an extra-legal state of affairs which is tolerated or embraced by the legal authorities.

Camp X-ray, Guantánamo Bay

[24] Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P, 2005), and *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005).

How are such developments to be resisted? By appeal to a different kind of authority, a different 'suspension' of the existing order, as Williams implies. The figure who is increasingly invoked here is St Paul. Paul arouses interest because he is the theologian of the 'State of Exception', giving an account of what is to be done when 'the law' is shown to be no longer adequate. His theology is variously described, therefore, as 'messianic' or 'revolutionary', and has proved surprisingly attractive to philosophers of the left.[25] Agamben follows Jacob Taubes in reading the opening of Paul's Epistle to the Romans as intensely political. This is because, for Paul, we are in a new age, in which the 'supremely generative and revisionary act of all human history', the cross of Christ, has nullified all other political powers. Their authority is strictly provisional, until Christ returns—they are, as it were, 'lame duck' regimes. It is not surprising that sometimes they lash out violently, like King Herod, against the Lord who is extinguishing their rule.

Conviction

Even a neutral sociological account of martyrdom, such as that offered by Eugene and Anita Weiner, recognises the power and importance of 'the martyr's conviction' as a regenerative force in human affairs.[26] The deep human need for conviction is so strong as to be comparable to the instinct for survival itself; in extreme situations the two will be in conflict, and in martyrdom conviction triumphs. This contest is especially evident either in the early stages of a culture's emergence or when a culture is in need of revitalisation: at these times 'The martyr serves as a key to understanding the problem of making culture plausible within the human condition.'[27]

As the Weiners observe, however, in many respects the contemporary Western world seems to offer an exception to this principle. Especially in the post-9/11 era, it proclaims its scepticism towards any kind of conviction, not least where this concerns religious

[25] As well as Taubes and Agamben, see Alain Badiou, *St Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003), and Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000).
[26] See Eugene and Anita Weiner, *The Martyr's Conviction: A Sociological Analysis* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990).
[27] Weiner and Weiner, *The Martyr's Conviction*, 52.

belief. This is certainly how Islamists see the West. But can a life be truly lived without conviction? What will happen to a society or culture in the long run, if it lacks even a basic self-confidence in its ideals and values?

The version of this dilemma which concerns us here is this: if people are not willing to grant credence to the Islamist suicide bomber, why should they pay any more attention to the witness of Christian martyrs like Oscar Romero and the UCA victims? In response, we must listen once again to the warning of Rowan Williams. Once a society has allowed itself to exclude the religious or eschatological dimension, it runs the danger of becoming an uncritical social order, one which has 'forgotten how to fail'. It will not recognise the contradictions involved in its own claims to 'exceptionality', its implicit demand for idolatrous self-worship. Such a society will be especially incapable of acknowledging the sanctified violence of its own 'holy wars'. Without such a dimension, the deaths of the martyrs of El Salvador—and those of Perpetua, Cyprian and Fr Christopher—will be regarded as horrific but random and unconnected events. The cosmic significance of what these brave men and women have to say will be missed, namely, that the Christian martyr's proclamation of 'our God reigns' is also a call to the world: 'change your mandate'.

From a secularised perspective, the testimony of the martyrs will be indistinguishable from the fanaticism of the suicide bomber. Our task, as their grateful martyrologists, is to help the world come to see how they are utterly different. In the end this includes, but goes beyond, the question of whether participation in armed conflict is a disqualification for martyrdom, or whether the 'true' Christian martyr dies in defence of the Christian faith only, rather than in defence of a principle such as justice or freedom. As Cavanaugh suggests, in his extended comparison of martyrdom ancient and modern, such questions place too much emphasis on the individual martyr and his or her intentions.[28] More to the point, surely, is what we can discern in the martyr's life, shaped as it is by imitation of the Crucified One, whose regenerating, life-giving love was met by evil, but refused to do evil in return.

[28] Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 66.

Even if a total 'supra-sacramental' transparency is impossible, we rejoice to find in these Christian deaths an absence of resentment. Despite the horror, a serene faith should permeate our remembrance: nothing has been lost. There is no need to commemorate anxiously, as if there is a danger that these Jesuits and their companions, and all 'Friday's Children', will somehow be forgotten.[29] I conclude, with gratitude, with the words of the French Dominican theologian Jean-Pierre Jossua:

> Christian witnessing first of all has a humanizing effect. Young people grow up in a certain way, people ravaged by life regain hope, and so on. It makes a good deal of sense and has great value as a sign, independently of any religious discovery. The same thing is true of collective acts and achievements which are inspired by faith and to which faith gives its power of hope: they too count fully .... Every trace of true humanity—or every trace of the gospel, which authenticates it for us—every spark of goodness or beauty which arises in the world, has an absolute and irrevocable value in its fullness and in its fleeting nature. And is not our hope that God—according to Jesus the God of the living, not the dead—keeps them for ever in his creative memory? However, the happy ending, the true goal of witnessing, is the dawn of God in a human life.[30]

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[29] The inspiration for the title 'Friday's Children' comes from W. H. Auden's poem about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, entitled 'Friday's Child'. In each case a reference is intended, both to the sacrifice of Calvary, and to the nursery rhyme claim that Friday's child is 'loving and giving'.
[30] John-Pierre Jossua, *The Condition of the Witness* (London: SCM, 1985), 87–88.