

## Being and Witnessness: Minding the Gap between Martyrs and Witnesses

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### I

Jon Sobrino just happened not to be in El Salvador when six of his fellow Jesuits—including noted theologian Ignacio Ellacuría—and two others were assassinated by the Salvadoran army on November 16, 1989. Sobrino survived only because he was out of the country. I was speaking to a Jesuit recently who pointed out that the difference between Sobrino and the martyrs was a plane ticket.

When there is a martyr, there are also others who remain alive to remember and to tell. Most importantly, the live ones—what Primo Levi in his book *The Drowned and the Saved* calls, not the *complete or true witnesses*, but the *exceptions*—are the ones who decide to call the dead *martyrs* in the first place. Levi writes, “We, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. . . . We are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are . . . the complete witnesses. . . . They are the rule, we are the *exception*.”<sup>1</sup>

Our word *martyr* comes from the Greek for *witness*. The rationale in Christian thought for connecting these two—witness and martyr—has been that the death of martyrs is somehow a witness to the gospel. But it was never *precisely* the death that in some perverse way, perhaps, proclaimed the good news. It was, as Augustine said, the reasons for which the martyrs died—their cause, their mission,

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<sup>1</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 83–84, emphasis added.

their movement—that made them martyrs. Being part of the Jesus movement has always meant that your life might very well be cut short, not to mention the other troubles, harassments, and abuses that you were likely to suffer. When Christians think about violence and our fallen members, we have to say that it is the *life* rather than the *violence*—rather than the death—that makes a martyr.

## II

We need to acknowledge that there is a thin line, then, between celebrating the suffering itself and celebrating the manner of living, the *liveness*, that provokes the pagans to inflict it. Texts like 1 Peter 2:19–20 come to mind: “For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God’s approval.” Early Christian martyrologies very clearly reflect this tension, this needing to tread the thin line between celebrating suffering and celebrating righteousness, obedience, and the overall committed life of the disciple. Elizabeth Castelli’s book *Martyrdom and Memory* wonderfully shows how the ethos of early Christianity was, in part, not only reinforced by these martyrological accounts, but crucially also *produced them* for the purpose of fostering these memories of a particular sort in the first place.<sup>2</sup>

In my own work, though, I have not wanted to allow my interest in martyrdom to be focused on the first few Christian centuries. This has led me to a deep awareness of the politics of identity surrounding these issues. As a white, male, middle-class American, I have felt the need to struggle with themes here that I might normally be tempted to believe are burdens for other people, but not for me.

This is simply not the case, though, and I worry about why I might ever have thought so. Consider the very powerful recent example of the murder of Ronnie Smith, a Christian American who was teaching in Libya. After the fact, Ronnie’s wife Anita wrote an open letter to the people of Libya expressing their love for them. Most strikingly, she addressed Ronnie’s attackers:

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

To his attackers: I love you and I forgive you.

How could I not? For Jesus taught us to “Love our enemies”—not to kill them or seek revenge. Jesus sacrificed His life out of love for the very people who killed him, as well as for us today. His death and resurrection opened the door for us to walk on the straight path to God in peace and forgiveness. Because of what Jesus did, Ronnie is with Jesus in paradise now. Jesus did not come only to take us to paradise when we die, but also to bring peace and healing on this earth. Ronnie loved you because God loves you. Ronnie loved you because God loved him—not because Ronnie was so great, but because God is so great.<sup>3</sup>

What is striking here is that we have one martyr but two witnesses. Ronnie lost his life and Anita lost her husband. For Christianity, a martyr’s death is itself a witness for the way that it shares in, appropriates, and upholds the dignity, glory, and righteousness of Christ’s own death. But even more so, the martyr’s death is made sense of by the life that led to it and that follows on from it—not just the martyr’s individual hope for resurrection, but the life that the remnant, remainder, non-martyred community attests to in how it speaks of the ones it has lost.

It is not likely that Ronnie was the victim of what is sometimes labeled “religious violence.” At the same time, Ronnie was a Christian and Anita was and is remembering his death in a thoroughly Christian way. And why not? On the surface, Ronnie was not killed for being a Christian. But the reason he went to Libya in the first place, the reason he risked his life and the safety of his family, and the reason he stayed there—these were all tied to his Christian commitments. That makes sense of Ronnie’s death. But those to whom it makes sense want to keep alive the memory of his death for what is the *real work* of Christian witness—not celebration of the lives of martyrs; not keeping alive the stories of their deaths or the brutality or cold-heartedness or neglect of their killers. Rather it is celebration of the surprising, new thing that surprises every Christian: that being a friend of sinners means forgiving killers, especially when they are yours. This is why between Ronnie and Anita Smith, we have one martyr and two witnesses. It’s the connection between the two that is this essay’s focus.

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<sup>3</sup> Anita Smith, “An Open Letter from the Widow of Ronnie Smith to the Libyan People,” December 12, 2013, [ronniesmithlibya.com](http://ronniesmithlibya.com).

I want to put before us one more concrete case. Malcolm Gladwell tells the story of the Derksen family, Mennonites from Winnipeg. The daughter of Wilma and Cliff Derksen had been kidnapped on her way to school and her murdered body was found a few days later, hands and feet bound. Gladwell writes:

Wilma and her husband Cliff were called in to the local police station and told the news. Candace's funeral was the next day, followed by a news conference. Virtually every news outlet in the province was there because Candace's disappearance had gripped the city.

"How do you feel about whoever did this to Candace?" a reporter asked the Derksens.

"We would like to know who the person or persons are so we could share, hopefully, a love that seems to be missing in these people's lives," Cliff said.

Wilma went next. "Our main concern was to find Candace. We've found her." She went on: "I can't say at this point I forgive this person," but the stress was on the phrase *at this point*. "We have all done something dreadful in our lives, or have felt the urge to."<sup>4</sup>

*At this point* is striking. Even though the Derksens had not yet forgiven, they knew that they would. This was a kind of witness to Gladwell—not just the death, you see; in fact, in this case, not really in the death at all. The survivor community tells of the death in a way that proclaims the gospel: like resurrection, it keeps God's story going.

My focus in this article goes to what Augustine said about what makes a martyr—not her death, but the manner of her life that leads to it, that makes it more likely, or even provokes it. It is not the punishment but the cause that makes the martyr.<sup>5</sup> It is the manner of life shared by those who survive to remember that kind of life in a particular way. The Christian needs to ask: what if this manner of living—the obedience to the ways of God, to the teachings and example of Jesus—*does not* get you killed? As Terry Eagleton summarized Herbert McCabe, if you think you have taken up your cross in a crucifying world and do not end up dead, you have some

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<sup>4</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, "How I Rediscovered Faith," *Relevant* 67 (January/February 2014); <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/culture/books/how-i-rediscovered-faith>.

<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on Psalm 34*, 2.13.

explaining to do.<sup>6</sup> So it seems we need to speak about a group beyond Levi's *complete witnesses*. If Augustine is right that martyrs are not identified by their deaths, what should we make of those whose embrace of the life of faith might well have made them martyrs in other settings? In short, can we speak of living martyrs?

At this point, I want simply to say I think the answer is yes, we can. But what we call living martyrs, or *live* or *alive* martyrs, is witnesses. And the thing that qualifies them to be called witnesses of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that they do the work of naming victims as martyrs and strive to forgive the killers. In the debates over what makes someone a martyr, I want to suggest that we might simplify things quite a bit by following Augustine's direction. What is a martyr? A martyr is someone whose death can be forgiven by others. The remnant community names the martyr *by their forgiveness*.

### III

In common usage, the iconic witness, especially after the Holocaust, is the survivor. It is someone whose testimony of genocide or mass murder reports what she has seen: the death, perhaps the martyrdom, of others. The witness holds both the memory of the crime and the lives of the crime's victims. Such a witness holds the memory, but doesn't hold onto it; instead, she *bears* witness, meaning that she *shares* witness, tells testimony. If we have puzzled over the question of what makes a martyr, in my view we have tended to puzzle much less over what makes a witness. Still, it is a deeply important project that also entails great risk. I want to look into both: the way the project can get underway, and also signal the dangers.

Robert Harvey, who teaches French and comparative literature at State University of New York at Stony Brook, has written a fascinating book called *Witnessness: Beckett, Dante, Levi and the Foundations of Responsibility*.<sup>7</sup> He works with the strangeness of this English word *witness* with the odd grammar it implies. The suffix *-ness* normally turns any adjective or past participle into a noun (*strange* becomes *strangeness*; *broken* becomes *brokenness*). Turning these things into

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<sup>6</sup> Terry Eagleton, "Christianity Fair and Foul," Yale University Terry Lecture, April 1, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Harvey, *Witnessness: Beckett, Dante, Levi and the Foundations of Responsibility* (New York: Continuum, 2010).

nouns stabilizes them, fixes them, secures them, rescues them. According to Harvey, the later work of Samuel Beckett shows him going crazy with *-ness* words. We watch words go from adjectival one-offs to substantive states of being, features, characteristics that spread themselves beyond the *one* (French: *l'on*) to *every-one*. Old English was even more *-ness*-oriented such that there existed the stand-alone noun *ness*.<sup>8</sup>

Yet *witness* is not what it sounds like it should be, the characteristic or quality or being of *wit*. And this is precisely the problem Harvey notes with our understanding of the iconic, paradigmatic, incomplete witness—the survivor. You can seem to become one almost by accident: you happened to see something, for example; or like Sobrino, you happened to survive and others did not. The *-ness* has appeared and attached itself to this word too soon, before we had a chance to ask about what makes a witness—what characteristics, which qualities one must possess in order to be one. Harvey's strange term *witnessness* intervenes to stall the hasty appearance of the first *-ness* in order to get us to consider the features of the witness.

If there are features of witnesses independent of circumstance, such as whether one is a survivor or a victim, then just as I have argued is the case with martyrs, everyone with these qualities is a potential witness. Harvey cautions against making witnesses the exception, possessing qualities most of us are unlikely to reach—and why should we reach them if we can manage to avoid seeing what they saw? Instead, Harvey asks:

Was there not, *is* there not, some exercise of the mind already present in us and to which we might avail ourselves in order to turn our admiration into active emulation, to join our models, join forces with them in the state of being witness? Or must we, as so many twentieth-century narratives have suggested, be subjected to a crime ourselves before adopting the condition of righteousness?<sup>9</sup>

We make a mistake if we turn the witness into an exception. But it is more than a mistake: we actually reproduce something of the same

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<sup>8</sup> Harvey, *Witnessness*, 5 n. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Harvey, *Witnessness*, 2.

distancing that produces martyrs and witnesses in the first place.<sup>10</sup> There is violence encoded in this distance. The absolutely crucial suffix *-ness* adds to witness one's "readiness to assume that role."<sup>11</sup> So it is not enough to talk about the action or activity of coming forward to testify since that activity springs from a state of being, a quality of character, a preparedness to witness. Again, this is what Harvey means by *witnessness*, and it's available to everyone. He goes on to explain that "I mean *possessing* all the qualities of a witness—especially those that attend the witness's intrinsic empathy with the victim—without there ever necessarily having been a crime committed."<sup>12</sup> We might think, for example, of Edward Snowden as being, on the one hand, exceptional for having seen what most of us have not, and would not, had it not been for his witness-bearing activity. On the other hand, he is unexceptional—or ought to be if we think of what kind of love of truth or empathy with the victims of lies and violations of privacy that one may have, even without working for the NSA.

Here it is possible to see that the qualities that make one a potential witness are the same as those that make one a potential martyr. Sobrino and Ellacuría are no different in this regard, nor are Martin Luther King, Jr., and many others, such as John Lewis and Andrew Young. So not only does danger lie in over-exceptionalizing the witness for being a survivor, perhaps by happenstance, since this exempts the rest of us from cultivating readiness for playing that role. Danger also lies in drawing too strong a distinction between Levi's "complete witnesses" (who are the dead victims) and the "surviving witnesses" or what Jean-François Lyotard called the *differend*. Augustine understood this, I believe, when he insisted that it is not the death that makes the martyr. If that is true, then neither does surviving the crime make a witness out of the witness. Only *witnessness* is ultimately responsible for that.

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<sup>10</sup> I recall with a sense of irony a critique of my book *To Share in the Body: A Theology of Martyrdom for Today's Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2008) that claimed I had too narrowly identified a "we" as those who are unlikely to be martyred since it excludes Christians in more dangerous parts of the world. My aim had been to identify such a "we" for showing the dangers in over-exceptionalizing martyrs, the risks of taking such a "we" for granted, but for some my strategy appeared to reinforce the very thing I had tried to overcome.

<sup>11</sup> Harvey, *Witnessness*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Harvey, *Witnessness*, 3.

## IV

Harvey sees witnesshood as a way in to talking about a universal ethic of responsibility. There is a hair's breadth between the witness and the martyr and Harvey's own text is an exploration of the minute distance between them.

In my own work, I had been associating witness with martyrdom in order both to steal death from martyr-identity and to invigorate witness with the thrill of risk.<sup>13</sup> Associating them seemed to me to be the right way to do this. It still does. But Harvey is important for reminding us that there is a sliver of difference between them, a gap that unsettles both. When the postmoderns speak of *otherness*, there must always be a preserve of distance—however small—that prevents the two parties from collapsing into each other. Otherwise one or both of them disappears, one into the other or both into some new, third thing that forgets the former two.

This disappearing and forgetting is perilous to witnessing. For example, the silence of Lyotard's *differend* is construed as negative evidence by Holocaust deniers. The *differend* is unable to speak what is unimaginable, like Kant's description of the mind before the sublime. Where the only acceptable eyewitnesses are the victims, the survivor's inadequate testimony seems only to prove that the gas chambers did not exist.<sup>14</sup> According to Levi, most of the Holocaust's eyewitness accounts come from survivors who never knew, nor could imagine, the enormity of the crimes. "Those who did so," he writes, "did not return, or their capacity for observation was paralyzed by suffering and incomprehension."<sup>15</sup>

Witnesshood keeps open the gap; it tries to speak it, against the odds. For help, Harvey mostly looks to Samuel Beckett's enigmatic tract *Worstward Ho* (1983). He notes that Beckett always sought to dwell between two languages—French and English—and wanted

<sup>13</sup> Craig Hovey, *Bearing True Witness: Truthfulness in Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), esp. chaps. 4–6.

<sup>14</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), esp. 2–3. Harvey argues that even though it does not meet the requirements of realist, conventional witnessing, only *imagination* of witnesshood can often break the silence brought on by the unimaginable (Harvey, *Witnesshood*, 117–24).

<sup>15</sup> Primo Levi, "The Drowned and the Saved" (excerpt), in *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*, ed. Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 33.



to be seen as both author and translator of his own works. Harvey writes that Beckett

knew that the translator is one who is never quite here nor there and that in order for the sense of a word or the sense of a phrase to be borne across the interval between the two idioms, the translator must be able to ply the gap, mind the gap, show the gap, never quite closing the gap. *Worstward Ho* is untranslatable because it is *in itself* translated: it contains its own translation. *Worstward Ho* is written *between* French and English.<sup>16</sup>

Harvey goes on to say that Beckett wrote for the forked tongued, “for one who speaks the languages in the twain of witness and martyr, that language bridging the gap between the two.”<sup>17</sup>

This gap may be as small as a hyphen, Harvey notes, with which Lyotard pried apart Judaism and Christianity in his description of Paul the apostle. Beckett looks at how two bodies may be brought together, closing the gap—or rather *closing in on* the gap between them, without eliminating it. As Beckett writes in an earlier work: “We advanced side by side hand in hand. . . . Sometimes they let each other go. The clasp loosened and they fell apart. Whole minutes often passed before they clasped again. Before his clasped mine again.”<sup>18</sup>

Hand-holding strikes me as unnecessarily non-erotic in this case, if what we are after is the fit of bodies. It is true that side-by-side is a real possibility and names a real kind of relationship. As William James noted in *Pragmatism*, “The lowest grade of universe would be a world of mere *witness*, of which the parts were only strung together by the conjunction ‘and.’”<sup>19</sup> Witness as brute list. In contrast, Harvey describes how the “*reunion* of the witness with the martyr is for everyone to accommodate *within*.”<sup>20</sup>

Harvey more often describes this simultaneous gap-closing and gap-preserving enterprise in Beckett’s language: a search for what he calls the *leastmost*. The place—or perhaps the oscillation—between unity and diversity, union and division, penetration and abandonment,

<sup>16</sup> Harvey, *Witnessness*, 41–42.

<sup>17</sup> Harvey, *Witnessness*, 42.

<sup>18</sup> Harvey, *Witnessness*, 43.

<sup>19</sup> William James, *Pragmatism* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1948), 156. Cited in Harvey, *Witnessness*, 54 n. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Harvey, *Witnessness*, 67.

over-knowing and forgetting: the witness as third part lives this duality “between the martyr one might have been and the witness it is one’s duty to be.”<sup>21</sup>

For Harvey, the duty to be a witness (again, what he calls *witnessness*) is identical with the witness’s being between here and there, “atwain”: “just ‘one’ for me, for you, for everyone.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, the life the witness lives is now marked by a duty brought about by the death of the martyr. The life of the one depends on the death of the other and so is lived, as it were, between life and death, the survivor and the victim. Witnessness arises where the self (*life plain and simple*) is now a self between oneself and others. “Half no but on the verge,” writes Beckett. “The verge of what?” we ask. Of becoming a responsible self, a witness who lives between. “Being *between* is *to become*,” says Harvey, who is summarizing Deleuze and others. “Not to become oneself but to become two-self, three-self, and so *on*. . . . Betweenness begins the begetting of witnessness.”<sup>23</sup> This being is witnessness.

## V

It is important to keep in mind that the martyrs Harvey is thinking of are those who died in places like Auschwitz. When he is not reflecting on Beckett, he is thinking about Primo Levi and the *Muselmann*. The witness’s talkativeness is *of* the silenced martyr. His life’s vicariousness is *for* the dead.<sup>24</sup>

It is also important to point out that Harvey wants to rescue the coextensiveness and inextricability of the witness and the martyr from a phenomenon he claims to see in Christianity and Islam, both of which he believes mistakenly separated them to begin with. In a remarkably careless and essentializing set of comments, he claims that Islam borrowed from Christianity what he sees in the Christian

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<sup>21</sup> Harvey, *Witnessness*, 44.

<sup>22</sup> Harvey, *Witnessness*, 44.

<sup>23</sup> Harvey, *Witnessness*, 44.

<sup>24</sup> The reason for continual intercession and vicariousness is, as Lyotard argued, the unsuitability of both silence *and* testimony to what was witnessed: “This [being of the *differend*] is when the human beings who thought they could use language as an instrument of communication learn . . . to recognize that what remains to be phrased exceeds what they can presently phrase, and that they must be allowed to institute idioms which do not yet exist” (Lyotard, *Differend*, 13).

memory of St. Stephen's death, a memory and impulse he refers to as the "crazy logic" of believing that a martyr witnesses to his faith. "At first there were only martyrs," he writes. "And these martyrs were witnesses. Then came the Christians." What ruined everything? It's the association of Hellenistic *martur* with Christianity's "wacky idea that there's something beyond *Purgatorio*." This is clearly "religion" as Feuerbach, Freud, and Marx understood it. Here, Harvey's understanding (which on this point is disappointingly limited) is that for religious folks, "the only *just* witness . . . is a dead witness," to which he asks, "What is the point of life at all?"<sup>25</sup> Why not rather seek death and cut life short if something better lies beyond it?

The question is not a chimera. It is rather a concern against which Christianity and Islam have both for centuries been on their guard. In *City of God*, Augustine spends a lot of time arguing against the pagan heroes: No, it is not justified to kill yourself out of shame or even to avoid sinning with the consequence that, he says, "since not even this reason is just, then none is."<sup>26</sup> The suicide—the death wish, the martyr-complex—is barred from being remembered as a martyr.<sup>27</sup> In general, the suicide fails to embrace the goodness of life, which comes from God, and it radically undervalues one's attachments to the communities of which one is a member. These are live communities that must work to sustain the dead in their memory; the suicide burdens that memory with a death that always threatens to overshadow the life.

The thing to notice is that Christianity seeks in its martyrs the suicide's complete opposite. Harvey makes the all too common mistake of thinking that we can know martyrs by their death. Yet Christianity is nothing if not a radical embrace and movement for the spread of life, as Jesus in John's Gospel declares to be the reason for his coming (John 10:10). Harvey misses something crucial. And it is not only that he misreads Christianity or even all religion as being "otherworldly." The thing he misses is that for every person and culture, each in their own ways, there are always available versions of embracing the life of some that mean death for others. And if my life cannot be preserved

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<sup>25</sup> Harvey, *Witnessness*, 15–16.

<sup>26</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, I.27.

<sup>27</sup> The only exception Augustine makes, at least, is for a person who kills himself in direct response to a command from God, which is how he understands Samson. But these are exceptions.

without making others victims, my embrace of life may very well entail my own premature death.

This is a tragic and disastrous mistake on Harvey's part and, it goes without saying, he is not alone in making it. If I embrace life as the goodness of God's creative fullness for humanity *in this world*, I may reach a tipping point beyond which my own life is imperiled by my refusal to allow my living to sow death for others.

Christian martyrdom and Christian witness have what we might call several levels of vicariousness. Since Christ's death is paradigmatic, the deaths of his followers are not only united asymptotically with the living ones. This is a vicariousness that Harvey identifies and endorses. The gap is minded and marked by what is *leastmost*, a shared *lessness*. This is right, but there is more (*lessmore?*).

In addition to being united with each other, the martyr and the witness are also united with Christ's death and share in his resurrection joy. And what is this? It is precisely the vindication of life against a death-dealing world. Why don't religious people seek death on purpose, as Harvey admits to have been asking "true believers" of every stripe for years?<sup>28</sup> The Christian answer is quite simple and is surprisingly close to his own project at points: it is because Christian witness has nothing to do with dying and has everything to do with living. But that is precisely what makes it so dangerous in a world where the life of some depends on the death of others.

It is also why Christian witnesses do not primarily bear testimony about the inexplicable, wrongful, and tragic deaths of the fallen members of our movement, or primarily go on about how their human rights were violated. Instead, they are principally speaking about God's goodness in overturning and overcoming death. Martyrs may die joyfully, blessing and forgiving their killers because Christ is risen. To state the obvious, the content of Christian talkativeness, of Christian testimony, is "Jesus is risen," and not "Jesus was crucified." It is a different sort of survivor archetype.

This is all tied to what I was saying earlier: that the ethical mode for such witnesses is, as Anita Smith shows us, *forgiveness*. For this reason I don't think Harvey succeeds in giving us a universal ethic of responsibility. The Christian difference I am highlighting is certainly not at every point all the way down, but where it is most different is also most significant. *The Christian, in forgiving the martyrs' killers, identifies the martyrs as martyrs*. So if a purported universal ethic

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<sup>28</sup> Harvey, *Witnessness*, 15.

keeps speaking about how they were killed, the Christian responsibility takes this on as part of the larger charge to remember the dead as part of a larger redemption story. Forgiving killers is part of how that story gets told. If the life makes a martyr, then a community of the same witness of the dead will say so.

## VI

In conclusion, I want to gesture toward some matters that must await another occasion to be developed more fully. First, if forgiving killers is how the community names the martyr, then let us notice that this can be used to critique the ways that some martyrs are remembered, as manifestly *not* keeping alive the story of God, but as keeping alive the old antagonisms, of actually reminding the community that there is much that remains unforgiven. What are the features of a martyrdom discourse that in its particular ways of remembering refuses to forgive the killers, the killers' group, nation, race, descendants, and so on? German Lutheran remembrance of Christ's death at the hands of Jews is an historical example; remembrance characterized by enduring bitterness encouraged by *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* is another. The Anglican and Catholic "Uganda Martyrs" of 1885–1887, who were reportedly killed in part for their refusal to respond to the homosexual advances of the king—though this was not the main reason—may as a memory haunt current Ugandan politics. How can they be remembered in a way that does not continue violence into the present?

Furthermore, how should we characterize the *-ness* of witness-ness? I have elsewhere developed the virtue or state or characteristic of what in Greek is called *parrhesia*: fearlessness or boldness in speaking the truth, a major concept in the book of Acts. This theme was a key interest of Michel Foucault in his last work. Here I can only gesture toward how this *-ness* characterizes the witness. If the gap we have been minding at first blush looks like it is between life and death, survivor and victim, witness and martyr, it is a gap to close *leastmost*. If reunion between witness and martyr is something that everyone must accommodate within, the *-ness* that athwarts the two must be this fearlessness, this boldness in the face of death, the push to live right up to death a life that is not had by robbing others of it.

Relatedly, we will need to critique deeply mistaken Christian views of sacrifice. Jesus' teaching about "no greater love" than that which causes one to lay down his life (John 15:13) is subject to the exceptionality of the martyr that I have here sought in many ways to

frustrate. These words are often used exceptionally in war memorials; they are also the name of a nonprofit group that supports this kind of remembrance at American military cemeteries.

Both witness and martyr identify the death-world and conspire to live in its face anyway. In doing so, the *-ness* of witness may turn out to be the *-ness* of a kind of wit after all. I earlier quoted from Levi, who noted that some are survivors due to “their prevarications or abilities”—to their wit. We might say there is also a Christian wit, one required to rob death of its power by refusing to fear it. As Richard Wright displays in *Native Son* when Bigger Thomas is being interrogated by white police officers who are trying to force him to confess raping a white girl:

“I don’t want to.”

“You *have* to!”

“I *don’t* have to.”

“Well, we’ll *make* you.”

“You can’t make me do nothing but die!”<sup>29</sup>

*You can’t make me do nothing but die!* The wit that makes that effrontery possible—this witnessness—is the living, breathing quality of martyrdom and not only because when you say such things you are more likely to be killed. More importantly, as I have argued throughout, the ability to rob one’s killers of the ability to dictate the significance of one’s death is part of what it will mean for others to look back on the killing and call it a martyrdom.

There are strong affinities with writings from black theologians and womanist theologians. Many of these have seen how the life makes the martyr. James Cone, for example, used Bigger Thomas’s words in *Black Theology and Black Power*. Moreover, JoAnne Marie Terrell argues that the reason the cross became the central image for early Christians was due to its ethos of martyrdom. They could only do this “in the light of the whole story about Jesus, including the incarnation, ministry, suffering and death, resurrection, and continuous intercession of the Holy Spirit.” The early Christians were so immersed in sacrifice language owing to martyrdom that the cross

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<sup>29</sup> Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper and Row, 1940, 1996), 311–12). Cited in James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997), 20.

bore a kind of metonymic significance for the whole of a life that makes death on a cross tragic and foreseeable, but not the objective. We notice again the thin line between celebrating the suffering itself and celebrating the manner of living that provokes others to inflict it. As Terrell continues, “In truth, the martyrs evinced a *sacramental witness*; they sought to demonstrate bodily the utter feasibility of life in love and honor, as their association with Jesus had taught them.”<sup>30</sup> A practical question for any Christian might be to ask how a determination to be living witnesses might also help to cultivate, in how we live our own lives of faith, a conscious indifference to the final distinction between martyrdom and witness, however slight that distinction might be.

Finally, there are questions about the *audience* of Christian testimony about martyrs. Is the audience primarily the Christian community itself? If so, how does (and should) the community attest to the limit of representation in its life and in its memory? Or, perhaps even more difficult, how will we face the reality that we may not be a church capable of doing justice to martyr-witness in our memory, given these limits? It is a concern raised in philosophies surrounding the Holocaust. “If the referent of the death camps is ‘unrepresentable’ as an experience, then Lyotard must assume the existence of an ‘audience’ who is able and willing to attest to this limit.”<sup>31</sup> If these are indeed limits Christians face with their martyrs, then functionally they are going to threaten to exceptionalize martyr-deaths and entrench a gap between martyrs and witnesses. They will only ever close it *leastmost* by attending to the manner of their living in the face of death—their witnessess.

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<sup>30</sup> JoAnne Marie Terrell, “Our Mothers’ Gardens: Rethinking Sacrifice,” in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2006), 48.

<sup>31</sup> Karyn Ball, “Ex/propriating Survivor Experience, or Auschwitz ‘after’ Lyotard,” in *Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma*, ed. Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Volger (New York: Routledge, 2003), 251.

