

One New Book for the Preacher

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Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (New York: Harper One, 2013), 310 pages.

The Christian's willingness to die for the faith has been the ultimate witness to the truth of Christianity. A suffering Church, a martyr Church, is Christianity at its best. Lent is a time to renew ourselves in this historical and embodied witness to the truth. Or is it? Candida Moss's book *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* calls this story into question. Moss, a professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at Notre Dame, has condensed a decade's worth of research into a clear and accessible narrative that undermines our assumptions about the motives of early Christian martyrs and the scope of the persecution they endured. Her book will interest not only pastors and history buffs, but anyone who participates in civil society. Moss asserts that the myth of persecution is poisoning contemporary political discourse. She maintains that a more truthful narrative about who Christians are and where they have come from serves both historical accuracy and the common good.

Martyrdom was not unique to Christians, Moss argues, though Christians did affect a change in the meaning of the Greek term *martyrs*, from courtroom witness to martyr. Both pagans and Jews embraced death for postmortem rewards, despite lacking a specific word for this behavior. Moss shows that martyrdom texts are highly stylized, beginning with the gospel of Luke. The author of the third gospel expunges the loneliness and terror that grips Mark's Jesus in the hour of his death. Luke turns Jesus into Socrates; he bears the cross serenely and manfully. Later, Eusebius of Caesarea would shoehorn the martyrs of Lyons and Vienne into the plotline of the Maccabean literature. Moss argues that other "early" martyrdom texts were written long after the events they purport to describe. The authors make their protagonists speak to contemporary theological and pastoral concerns. Moss concludes that martyrdom accounts have been subject to so much theologizing and editorializing that we have no real access to the historical martyr.

Martyrs were few in number, says Moss. The experience of persecution was sporadic and local. Pliny the Younger's letter to Emperor Trajan is the voice of a Roman bureaucrat seeking advice on a protocol for handling Christians in court. He is not bragging to Rome about the numbers of Christians caught in his dragnet. Emperors Decius and Diocletian implemented the worst persecutions, but neither targeted Christians per se, Moss writes. Christians were collateral damage in their efforts to unite the Empire and shore up their rule in a period of instability. True, the Romans despised Christians, but Moss asks the reader to understand the Roman point of view. The peace and prosperity of the empire were fragile goods, preserved by currying the favor of the gods. The Christian refusal to sacrifice to the gods looked like sedition to the Romans. "Piety" (*pietas* in Latin or *eusebia* in Greek) entailed more than religious devotion in the ancient world. Piety meant respect, and respect was owed in a whole web of relationships: to the gods, the emperor, the head of household, the teacher.

The Christian refusal to show piety to the gods tugged on a string that threatened to unravel the social fabric.

Moreover, the Christian martyrs as Moss presents them are not sympathetic characters. Christians could be truculent in court. They did not go to the lions loving their enemies, but rather demonizing their executioners. They reveled in the hope that they would watch Christ consign their enemies to the fires of hell. Just as members of some terrorist groups wear suicide belts because they possess neither tanks nor artillery, Christians offered their bodies in a war against the world because it was the only weapon at hand. Once Christians gained access to state power, they retained the propensity to demonize their opponents and to characterize their struggles as martyrdoms. As Moss tells it, the Crusades were not a rejection of the martyrdom ethos of the ancient Church, but instead its logical conclusion.

If Christians were not subject to sustained persecution, from whence comes this persecution narrative? Moss alleges that Acts of the Martyrs began to be written in earnest in the fourth century to buttress theological claims. Partisans in fourth century theological controversies claimed that their beliefs were orthodox because the martyrs had shed their blood for their beliefs. Martyrdom material also undergirded an emerging church bureaucracy headed by bishops. For instance, the origins of the Church in Roman Gaul are shrouded in mystery, but Eusebius of Caesarea lent badly needed credibility to the Gallic ecclesial power structure when he wrote that the martyrs of Lyon requested Irenaeus to be their bishop. Martyrdom literature also served to attract pilgrims to shrines. Tourist dollars were good for the economy then as now.

In *The Myth of Persecution*, Moss shifts back-and-forth from historian to public intellectual. She wants to explode the myth of persecution because talk of persecution has a chilling effect on contemporary political discourse. When powerful people and vested interests wrap themselves in the mantle of persecution, they exempt their own positions from rational inquiry and attempt to silence those with whom they disagree. Moss prefers that the public square be a place where all truth claims are subject to rational analysis. She asks that we be willing to learn from one another and have the freedom and courage to change our minds. It is hard to do any of these things when you take honest disagreement for persecution and your opponent for a servant of the devil. Moss also worries that a persecution mindset prevents people from making important moral distinctions and from comprehending the complexity of contemporary conflicts. A “War on Christmas” is a very different thing than the experience of Christians being kidnapped and murdered in Nigeria by Boko Haram. Indeed, Christians are not the only martyrs in the world. The Chinese government has been a thorn in the flesh to Falun Gong as well as Christianity. ISIL has persecuted both Christians and Yazidis in Iraq.

Moss’s case regarding the scope of martyrdom may be somewhat overstated. Martyr texts and shrines proliferated in the fourth century because the Church “had to run very fast indeed to stand still,” in the words of historian Robert Markus.¹ That is, the fourth century experience of peace diverged so sharply from previous Christian experience and from what Jesus had promised them that paradoxically, it generated deep anxiety. The literary output and building boom that memorialized the suffering of previous generations meant to say, “We have always been a community of martyrs, and by venerating their relics and committing their memories to writing, we always

will be.” Such massive efforts may mirror an earlier level of suffering that was deeper and broader than Moss’s minimalist reading of the evidence allows.

Despite some exaggeration, Moss points the reader in the right direction. She demonstrates that the ancient Christian martyr was a more complicated and ambivalent figure than we were led to believe. So were the times in which the martyrs lived. If imperial edicts expelled Christians from high public office, then that is evidence that Christians were wielding political power before Constantine came on the scene. Not all Christians were meek as mice, rounded up and slaughtered as soon as they popped their heads out of the catacombs. Some were suicidal; others could only be described as passive-aggressive. Most did not suffer unto death.

This Lent, the lectionary preacher will have to say a word about what it means to take up a cross and follow Jesus. He or she will have to address Christ’s “demonization” of Peter’s resistance to the cross. Furthermore, the preacher may find him or herself in situations of congregational, personal, or social conflict. How can Moss’s historical revisionism help the preacher in the pulpit, the pastor’s study, on the streets, or in city council chambers? The argument that Moss presents in *The Myth of Persecution* is largely deconstructive. She warns the preacher away from self-serving interpretations of cross-bearing and from a preoccupation with external enemies. In a sense, *The Myth of Persecution* elaborates on a pithy quote that Pope Gregory I attributed to Cyprian, the martyred bishop of Carthage: *Martyrem non facit poena, sed causa*; that is, “Penalties don’t make martyrs; causes do.”² Not every critical word the pastor hears is a cross to bear. Some may be the judgment of God—an accurate assessment of a deficiency the pastor needs to address. It is frustrating to pastors and parishioners that youth soccer tournaments sans prayers of invocation draw bigger crowds on Sunday morning than Christian worship, but indifference to the gospel is not the same as persecution, and irritation is not on par with death by crucifixion. At any rate, demonizing our secular neighbors is not likely to draw them into a relationship with Christ and his Church.

Moss allows that martyrs “can inspire understanding and forgiveness,” and “can motivate those who are oppressed to stand up against political tyranny and social injustice.”³ How, she does not say. That constructive task is left to the preacher, whose call is to preach Christ crucified in such a way that parishioners are inspired to say, “I’m sorry,” and “I forgive you.” It is not easy to lift high the cross in such a way as to call the high and mighty to humble themselves while inspiring the meek of the earth to claim their rightful inheritance, but with the help of the Holy Spirit and aided by good scholarship like Moss’s and a pinch of self-awareness, preachers can fulfill that task.

Notes

1 Robert A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 90.

2 Pope Gregory I, *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, translated by John H.C. Martyn (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2004), 222.

3 Moss, 261.