

The Maltreatment of Early Christians: Refinement and Response

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Many individuals have a simplistic view of the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire. As Laurie Guy laments, “Despite mountains of contrary evidence, many myths are so deeply embedded in consciousness that they are almost impossible to dislodge. Such is the case with the mountains of myths surrounding the topic of the persecution of the early church.”¹ For example, many individuals retain thoughts of Christians being hunted down until they take refuge in catacombs, popular lore abandoned by historians.² Joseph Lynch declares, “Countless modern books, films, and sermons have found a theme in the Roman persecution of the Christians. But the history of persecution is more complicated than it might seem.”³ In reality, neither the situation of early churches nor the approach of the Roman government nor the social-cultural milieu remained static.

A year ago, Professor Candida Moss of the University of Notre Dame amplified the conversation with her book *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom*.⁴ The tenor of her provocative volume is directed by a desire for a specific modern application (254–56), summarized in a recent interview: “As I say in my book, the myth of perse-

cution gives Christians that use it the rhetorical high ground, and using the myth makes dialogue impossible. The view that the history of Christianity is a history of unrelenting persecution endures in contemporary religious and political debate about what it means to be Christian. We must get history right, and if we can eliminate the rhetoric of persecution, we can have productive dialogue without the apocalyptic rhetoric of good and evil.”⁵

This present essay will use the publication of Moss’ news-catching work as an opportunity to re-examine the “persecution” of early Christianity. It will not interact with all facets of her book, but it will conclude with an alternative “moral to the story.” The essay will initially refine the image of “persecution” by reviewing the maltreatment of early Christians, drawing important distinctions, and investigating reasons and motivations. Based upon this nuanced understanding of the generally sporadic, largely local, and normally decentralized maltreatment of early Christians, this essay will conclude with an alternative “responsible reading” for the present. Rather than inciting a “martyr complex” leading to retaliation, the limited but real maltreatment of early Christians can, if the conversation is reoriented, actually lead to insights and renewed interest in a universal concept of religious liberty.

Local and Sporadic

Moss decries the “Sunday School myth” that contemporary American Christians have swallowed “hook, line and sinker,” which proposes that the early Christians were constantly harassed and continually persecuted by Roman authorities, from the time of Jesus through the Emperor Constantine (186, 217). But this caricature (perhaps even “strawman”) of constant, targeted oppression in the Roman Empire is indeed a “myth.”⁶ Scholars recognize that persecution in the Roman Empire was generally “local and sporadic.”⁷ As Everett Ferguson acknowledges, “Christianity was occasionally repressed in sporadic persecutions, but there was no general effort to root it out.”⁸

The phrase “age of the martyrs” can be misleading, as if the pre-Constantinian period was an era of continuous, sustained, imperially-coordinated martyrdom. Historians, who study the complexities of the past, tend to focus upon contextualizing particularities, including the specificities of time and place.⁹ In fact, early Christianity spread outside the confines of the Roman Empire, taking root in such locations as Edessa, Parthia, Armenia, and Gutthiuda (and sometimes faced mistreatment in such hinterlands).¹⁰ For the most part, maltreatment of Christians broke out in specific locales or regions. Moreover, these outbreaks were not strung together in a con-

tinuous line of unbroken persecution. The suppression of Christianity was irregularly enforced, and the severity of opposition largely depended upon the specific attitudes of local officials.

To this nuanced portrayal of the “local” and “sporadic” nature of the mistreatment of early Christians, one could add a corollary: the hostilities tended to be neither imperially coordinated nor systematic. Joseph Lynch notes that “persecutions were sporadic in time and place, depending in some instances on the attitudes of local Roman officials, who varied in their willingness to prosecute, and in other instances on the attitudes of the local people, who had varying degrees of antipathy to Christians.”¹¹

Moss argues that contemporary American Christians cry “persecution” at the hint of disagreement, and the commonly accepted picture of early Christianity as a martyr religion plays into this martyr complex. It should be acknowledged that American Christians regularly toss out the terms “persecution” and “persecuted” when they are rebuffed with a cutting remark or derisive scowl. Many Christians do find it increasingly difficult to support their views and values in the public square, whether in the media, education, or politics. But such marginalization is not persecution. Overuse of the emotionally charged term “persecution” tends to cheapen the term, and thereby relativizes the experience of global Christians who truly face persecution.

But Moss argues further. This sense of being persecuted causes contemporary Christians to retaliate in word and deed. And because Christians root this martyr mindset in a narrative that begins with earliest Christianity, as one discounts the Roman persecution of Christians one consequently reduces the modern martyr-complex and thus disarms retaliation.¹²

Nevertheless, retribution neither has to be nor should be the inexorable response to real persecution in the past. Some early Christians themselves provide alternative and supplemental discourses. Rather than inciting a “martyr complex” leading to retaliation, a refined understanding of the mistreatment of early Christians can actually lead to a renewed interest in a universal concept of religious liberty.

Overview

Moss asserts that the early Christians were not persecuted in the first decades of the Jesus movement, because this would be logically impossible, as they were not yet a distinct group called “Christians.”¹³ One does wonder if the splicing between term and concept has been employed too acutely,¹⁴ and one considers the possibility of hostility between a religion’s sects.¹⁵ Juda-

ism did include various competing sects (cf. Acts 24:14). From the outsider “pagan” perspective, Jews and “Christians” were commonly conflated, at least through the first century. Around the year 49, according to Suetonius, the Emperor Claudius expelled Jews from Rome because of agitation over “Chrestus,” which some think was a confused reference to Christ.¹⁶

Historians debate the role of the Jews in the maltreatment of early Christians.¹⁷ The Jewish role was definitely exaggerated at times, as when Justin Martyr claimed that the Jews “kill and punish us whenever they have the power.”¹⁸ Various scholars believe the Jewish role in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is exaggerated.¹⁹ Scholars caution against such over-generalizations and exaggerations, but the “parting of the ways” did lead to bitter disputes, and Jews at times mistreated members of the new Jesus movement. The Apostle Paul declares, “five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one” (2 Cor 11:24). He acknowledged that he himself had persecuted the church of God (Gal 1:13; 1 Cor 15:9), and that his own ministry led to tensions with Jews (1 Thess 2:14–16).

Historians also debate the exact nature of the role of the Roman authorities. John Foxe, the seventeenth-century English author, passed on a traditional framework of ten persecuting Roman emperors.²⁰ Modern scholars have moved beyond this simplistic construct.²¹ First, one should distinguish between persecution *by* an emperor and persecution *under* an emperor. One should also distinguish between mistreatment *promoted* by the imperial office and mistreatment *permitted* by them. Furthermore, one should distinguish between an intentional plan that targeted Christianity and an improvised reaction that affected Christians.

Classical historians disagree about how Nero came to be blamed for a fire in Rome.²² But the gist of Tacitus’ tale of Nero’s blame-shifting and then suppressing Christians is generally accepted among Roman historians, while acknowledging that his retelling may be influenced by sentiments of his own time (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44).²³ Tacitus portrays the Christians in a negative light, although his narrative also disapproves of Nero’s actions. “Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man’s cruelty, that they were being destroyed.”²⁴ Tacitus depicts Christians as anti-social residents filled with “hatred of the human race (*odio humani generis*),” capable of various “abominable vices” or “atrocities” (*flagitia*). According to Tacitus, “Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames.”²⁵ This mal-

treatment, which seems to have been localized in Rome, may be reflected in Suetonius and perhaps *1 Clement* 5–6. Suetonius notes that, under Nero, “Punishments were inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and depraved superstition (*superstitio nova ac malefica*).”²⁶

According to Dio Cassius, Domitian lashed out against certain high-ranking officials who observed “Jewish customs” and “atheism.”²⁷ Some believe that these officials were actually practicing Christians. The question and nature of anti-Christian hostility in Domitian’s reign, especially in Asia Minor, is frequently tied to the dating and interpretation of Revelation.²⁸ Tertullian thought of the Emperor Domitian as a second Nero.²⁹ Some materials in *1 Clement* are compatible with a Domitianic opposition to Christianity, although they do not prove it.³⁰ Although Domitian is remembered in Christian texts as a persecuting emperor, little external evidence explicitly confirms this.

Pliny the Younger, who corresponded with the Emperor Trajan in the early second century, called Christianity a “depraved and excessive superstition (*superstitio prava et immodica*).” Pliny described three classes of individuals accused of being Christians: those who denied they had ever been Christians, those who recanted their Christian confession, and those who remained steadfast in their faith. Only the latter were executed or were sent to Rome (if Roman citizens). The Emperor Trajan counseled that Christians were not to be sought out, anonymous accusations were not to be accepted, and those who recanted the faith were to be pardoned. “The correspondence does not create a policy but rather clarifies a preexisting practice. Whether it had the force of imperial law would have mattered little to the Christians whom Pliny executed.”³¹

Ignatius of Antioch’s correspondence has traditionally been dated to Trajan’s reign, although some push the date into Hadrian’s rule (or beyond).³² Ignatius’ feisty letters speak with verve and confidence: “Let fire and the cross; let the crowds of wild beasts, let tearings, breakings, and dislocations of bones, let cutting off of members; let shattering of the whole body; and let all the dreadful torments of the devil come upon me: only let me gain Jesus Christ.”³³

Historians discuss (and debate) a source called “Hadrian’s rescript.”³⁴ As found in Eusebius’ later *Ecclesiastical History* 4.9, the edict states, “If then the provincials can make out a clear case on these lines against the Christians so as to plead it in open court, let them be influenced by this alone and not by opinions or mere outcries. ... If then anyone accuses them, and shows that they are acting illegally, decide the point according to the nature of the of-

fense, but by Hercules, if any one brings the matter forward for the purpose of blackmail, investigate strenuously and be careful to inflict penalties adequate to the crime.”³⁵ Hadrian’s rescript describes the necessity of an illegality being committed, and the possibility of a false accuser being cross-charged.³⁶

Irenaeus mentions Telephorus of Rome, “who was gloriously martyred,” probably around 137.³⁷ Polycarp’s martyrdom is notoriously difficult to date as well, but most scholars prefer 155/156 (even though Eusebius places it in the reign of Marcus Aurelius).³⁸ The composition of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* has been strung across an even wider spectrum.³⁹ Justin was beheaded in Rome in 165 (during Marcus Aurelius’ reign), and some Christians were martyred in Lyons in 176/177.⁴⁰

The early third century was relatively calm. In 202, according to historical reconstructions, Septimius Severus forbade conversion to Judaism and Christianity, perhaps provoked by Jewish disloyalty.⁴¹ In North Africa, the brunt seems to have fallen upon catechumens.⁴² The *passio* of Perpetua narrates the execution of a young woman of some rank (Perpetua) and her servant (Felicitas).⁴³ Perpetua’s father was beaten in her presence, her newborn baby was torn away from her, and she was sent to the arena and the wild beasts.⁴⁴

Brief hostilities arose under Maximinus in 235/236,⁴⁵ but Christians enjoyed a favorable climate under Alexander Severus (222–235) and Philip the Arab (244–249). During the Decian persecution of 249–251, residents had to obtain a *libellum* (certificate), stating that they had offered incense, poured a libation, and tasted sacrificial meat.⁴⁶ Forty-four *libelli* are extant, including this example: “It was always our practice to sacrifice to the gods and now in your presence, in accordance with the regulations, we have sacrificed, have made libations, and have tasted the offerings, and we request you certify this.”⁴⁷

Even this Decian policy was an attempt to strengthen traditional Roman religion rather than a focused targeting of Christians.⁴⁸ Official policies could be intertwined with an imperial desire to rally morale, the greed of local authorities, and popular malice and hostility.⁴⁹ “When such ‘general sacrifices’ were ordered, Christians stuck out like a sore thumb because many would not worship the gods. Refusal to sacrifice was a serious crime because the person was thought to be purposely endangering the already fragile welfare of the empire by angering the gods.”⁵⁰

In 257, in the midst of military skirmishes and economic inflation, hostility returned as the Emperor Valerian sought to stabilize the empire and *pax deorum*.⁵¹ Within two years, Valerian issued two edicts. He forbade Chris-

tian assemblies, seized property, and exiled Christian leaders (and eventually executed some). Cyprian of Carthage wrote, “Valerian had sent a prescript to the Senate, to the effect that bishops and presbyters and deacons should immediately be punished [executed]; but that senators, and men of importance, and Roman knights should lose their dignity and moreover be deprived of their property.”⁵² Cyprian himself died in this persecution, as did Sixtus of Rome.⁵³

After Valerian came several decades of general peace, during which Christians rose in government ranks and many churches were built.⁵⁴ Gallienus, the subsequent emperor, already restored Christian places of worship by 261.⁵⁵ In 284, Diocletian came to the throne. An able leader, he overhauled the structure of the empire by forming a *tetrarchia* (“rule of four”) and by dividing the empire into a dozen dioceses and numerous provinces. Diocletian also reorganized the military and secured borders. In 302, a Christian deacon named Romanus interrupted the imperial court, and Diocletian had his tongue cut out and had him imprisoned (and eventually executed).⁵⁶ Around the year 303, a period of suppression commenced waves of hostilities, now known as the “Great Persecution.”⁵⁷ Diocletian does not seem to have harbored long-term resentment against Christians, as he had come to power seventeen years earlier (and he had previously allowed Christians to build a large church across from his palace).⁵⁸ Nevertheless, throughout the rest of his reign, Diocletian did “preside over many trials and tortures in person.”⁵⁹

After an official ceremony, the claim arose that soothsayers could not “read” the animal entrails because Christians had made the sign of the cross.⁶⁰ This only confirmed the sentiment that Christians were disloyal, and palace residents and soldiers were ordered to participate in traditional pagan sacrifices. Further hostility commenced with the razing of the church near the royal residence in Nicomedia.⁶¹ Diocletian banned Christians from the courts and high office, and he decreed that church meetings should cease, churches should be destroyed, and the Christian scriptures should be confiscated and burned.⁶² As the intensity of the persecution grew, Christian bishops were arrested and imprisoned (unless they offered pagan sacrifice). Diocletian ultimately insisted that all the empire’s residents sacrifice to the gods. Refusal eventually led to torture, maiming, enslavement, and sometimes execution. Extant materials relating these events mostly focus upon Nicomedia-Bithynia, Palestine, Egypt, and North Africa.⁶³ The “Great Persecution” left areas like Britain, Gaul, and Spain relatively untouched.⁶⁴ W. H. C. Frend estimated that a total of 3,000 to 3,500 Christians were killed in the period between 303 and 305.⁶⁵

Diocletian's successor, Galerius, continued the persecution until he himself fell ill. With his impending death, Galerius ended the persecution. A second mandate entreated Christians to pray to the Christian God on his behalf.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Maximinus Gaius, a new Augustus, continued the persecution in the East.⁶⁷ But the tides of fortune were shifting. By the time of the "Great Persecution," Christians perhaps totaled about ten percent of the empire's population, and "the church was so deeply entrenched that it could not be removed."⁶⁸ A few years after the death of Constantine, Julian "the Apostate" tried to turn the empire away from Christianity and back to paganism, but his attempt was short-lived. Julian did complete *Against the Galileans*, written in opposition to Christians.

Distinctions and Debates

Moss rightly contextualizes mistreatment by noting that life in antiquity was often brutal, and capital punishment was meted out broadly.⁶⁹ Roman society was accustomed to cruel and degrading public punishments and entertainment included public spectacles of violent suffering. Furthermore, Christians were not the only group to face suppression, which also fell upon Druids and Bacchants, for instance. Diocletian ordered that Manichees be burned. Of course, Rome's simmering tensions with its Jewish population erupted from time to time. And various Christian sub-groups, including Montanists and Donatists, suffered along with the others.

Were early Christians targeted by the Roman authorities? Moss draws a sharp distinction between *persecution* and *prosecution* (151). Christians were not harpooned for their specific beliefs but were caught in a net designed to enforce more general laws ("ancient justice" rather than "religious persecution," 164). Moss argues that true persecution must include execution directly resulting from the confession of Christian faith. Moreover, "persecution implies that a certain group is being unfairly targeted for attack and condemnation, usually because of blind hatred" (164). Again, persecution is "about an irrational and unjustified hatred" (254). Historians agree that Roman rulers had their reasons, and that they felt personally justified in their responses, but this emphasis upon irrational persecution to the downplaying of "rational" persecution is a different turn. Furthermore, it leaves open questions, as when seemingly "irrational" mob actions unfold, and a local ruler rationally decides it's not worth siding with the oppressed minority.

With this framework in mind, Moss argues that the suppression of Christianity by Diocletian's laws was "the first and only period of persecution that fits with popularly held notions about persecution in the early church"

(154). For example, Decius was not targeting Christians *qua* Christians so much as he was aiming for political solidarity through a return to traditional religious mores. Decius may have feared Christianity as a “state within a state.”⁷⁰ Moss argues, “That Christians experienced and interpreted Decius’s actions as persecution does not mean that Decius himself intended to persecute them. If we are going to condemn the Romans for persecuting the Christians, then surely they need to have done it deliberately or at least have been *aware* they were doing it” (150). Anne Thayer responds, “Awareness is a far stricter criterion than is used in much social and historical analysis where unintended impact is often understood to have important consequences.”⁷¹

Although the consequent was not the original intent of the imperial mandates, it was a natural result of imperial initiatives. Rather than stating that Christians were being prosecuted but not persecuted, one could implement a different distinction, one between intended persecution and experienced persecution. Although the authorities were not necessarily targeting Christians in particular, one might understand how they felt like targeted victims. Moreover, while Moss emphasizes that imperial policies were politically rather than religiously motivated, she also acknowledges that a dichotomy of politics and religion was unheard of in antiquity (174).

Another distinction might be helpful as well: the difference between the reality of persecution and the threat of persecution.⁷² Moss emphasizes that, in reality, imperial initiatives led to the execution of Christians for fewer than ten years *in toto* out of the three centuries from Jesus to Constantine (129). The periods making up these ten years landed in Nero’s hostilities of 64, the Decian opposition around 250, the Valerian persecution of 257–258, and the “Great Persecution” of 303–305 and 311–313. Yet could not a general fear of the *threat* of persecution naturally arise in a context in which the reality of persecution only intermittently or rarely surfaced? Greg Carey counsels, “Let us concede that just a few instances of repression and only a very few martyrdoms are necessary to create a culture of fear and resentment.”⁷³

As with many aspects of the maltreatment of Christians in the Roman Empire, scholars continue to debate the legal backdrop of persecution.⁷⁴ Some have argued for a specific legal precedent in Neronic legislation, but this seems unlikely.⁷⁵ As an upstart movement breaking away from Judaism and founded by a seditious leader, Christianity did not enjoy a right to protection. Although some scholars have distinguished between lawful (*licita*) and unlawful (*illicita*) religions,⁷⁶ partially based upon Tertullian’s description of Judaism as lawful, most do not accept such a clean distinction.⁷⁷ A.

N. Sherwin White has argued that no laws formally opposed Christianity, and authorities simply acted upon their broad right to preserve order (*coercitio*) and suppress shameful actions (*flagitia*).⁷⁸

Moss rightly notes, “Not every Roman administrator was interested in Christians; many just wanted to see them go away” (144). The Roman authorities thought of themselves as reasonable, temperate, and even lenient.⁷⁹ Authorities often gave multiple (often three in the retelling) opportunities for recantation.⁸⁰ Tertullian tells of a governor who put forth a carefully worded formula that was vague enough to be acceptable to both Christians and pagans.⁸¹ While the early Christian literature portrays persecuting authorities as irrational agents of Satan, they had their political and personal reasons for their opposition.

Local Roman magistrates practiced great flexibility in their treatment of Christians (cf. Acts 18:12–17; 19:23–41). A wide latitude was permitted to provincial governors to act on their own initiative (*cognitio extra ordinem*). And the function of *delatores* (informants) in the Roman legal system increased the variability, as did the vagaries of public sentiment.⁸² Celsus even complained that Christians provoked the wrath of rulers, thus bringing upon themselves suffering and even death.⁸³

Moss declares, “Very few Christians died, and when they did die, it was often because they were seen as politically subversive” (255). Historians debate how many Christians were actually killed.⁸⁴ By modern standards of genocide, “the number of martyrs was modest.”⁸⁵ The number probably totaled in the thousands (rather than hundreds), but likely would not have reached into multiple tens of thousands. With reasonable certainty, one may conclude that the total “while significant, was not massive.”⁸⁶ Nevertheless, as Jonathan Hill reasons, “For a community that represented a small minority of society at large, these deaths—even coming only occasionally—were of major significance to the whole group.”⁸⁷ Paul Holloway cautions against downplaying maltreatment on statistical grounds alone, “as if tallying actual deaths allows one to somehow quantify the lived experience of lethal prejudice.”⁸⁸

Moss rightly insists, for the vast majority of Christians of the pre-Constantinian period, “the climate was hostile, but there was no active persecution” (145). Tertullian noted that Christians could be found in all occupations and classes and ranks, and some came from the intellectual elite and upper echelons of aristocratic nobility.⁸⁹ Victor, the bishop of Rome in the 190s, convinced Marcia, the Emperor Commodus’ mistress, to release Christians sent to the Sardinian mines.⁹⁰ According to Eusebius, Alexander Severus placed a statue of Jesus in his palace shrine, and Severus’ mother

Julia Mammea tried to summon Origen, a church theologian, in order to discuss philosophy and doctrine.⁹¹ Another Christian leader, Julius Africanus, seems to have acted as Julia Mammea's spiritual advisor. Eusebius maintained that Philip the Arab (emperor from 244–249) was a Christian, although the claim is doubted by scholars.⁹² The Emperor Aurelian attempted to arbitrate in a dispute over the bishop's residence in Antioch. There were even whole villages of Christians in Asia Minor and Egypt. But none of this should downplay the real suffering of those who were indeed maltreated, or the pain of the families and faith communities of the executed.⁹³

Causes and Motivations

Why did early Christians sporadically face hostility and even persecution?⁹⁴ 1 Peter already hints that some Christians claimed they were being mistreated but were really being opposed for their own faults.⁹⁵ 1 Peter also hints at what Justin makes explicit, a sense of being opposed for the *nomen christianum* ("Christian name").⁹⁶ Even the earliest recension of the *Acts of Justin and Companions* includes a relevant confession of Christ.⁹⁷ Notwithstanding, the background of maltreatment was a complicated blend of social, political, personal, and religious reasons.

The impetus for maltreatment most often was not an imperial action but a localized grass-roots reaction, such as uncontrollable popular hostility.⁹⁸ The *Letter of Lyons* describes the local Christians being attacked with "abuse, blows, dragging, despoiling, stoning, imprisonment, and all that an enraged mob is likely to inflict on their most hated enemies."⁹⁹¹⁰⁰ In 248, Christians in Alexandria faced a series of mob attacks, even though the reigning emperor lacked any anti-Christian streak.¹⁰¹

Christians were generally looked down upon for their unsocial or antisocial behavior. As Celsus charged, "They wall themselves off and break away from the rest of mankind."¹⁰² Christians were also disdained for their stubbornness. Pliny opposed Christians for their "pertinacity and unbending obstinacy (*pertinacia et inflexibilis obstinatio*)." Christians could appear to be impudent in court, and A. N. Sherwin-White suggests they could be accused of contempt (*contumacia*).¹⁰³

Furthermore, churches were viewed with suspicion because they seemed secretive, and Christianity was perceived to be a recent contagion or upstart *superstitio* (rather than *religio*). According to Celsus, Christianity was "the cult of Christ," "a secret society whose members huddle together in corners."¹⁰⁴ Celsus depicted Jesus as a magician who learned sorcery in Egypt.¹⁰⁵ Caecilius, the pagan figure in Minucius Felix's *Octavius*, queried, "Why do

they have no altars, no temples, no publicly-known images? Why do they never speak in the open, why do they always assemble in stealth? It must be that whatever it is they worship—and suppress—is deserving either of punishment or of shame.”¹⁰⁶

“Too often,” warns Rodney Stark, “historians have ignored the sincerity of pagans, misreading their casual forms of worship for indifference,” yet “large numbers of Romans, especially those making up the political elite, sincerely believed that the gods had made Rome the great empire that it had become.”¹⁰⁷ In the average Roman mind, the traditional religious rituals were of the essence of being a good Roman, and “the whole of the empire was sustained and nourished by a system of delicate social structures and religious practices.”¹⁰⁸ Thus Christians endangered the *pax deorum* by not honoring the Roman gods. Roman citizens feared the growth of Christianity, as they watched traditional ways being abandoned in favor of the contagious *superstitio*. The Christian abandonment of the gods imperiled all, by risking divine wrath. Neglected gods would neglect the empire, so pagans naturally blamed Christians for misfortunes.¹⁰⁹ Tertullian wrote, “They think the Christians the cause of every public disaster, of every affliction with which the people are visited.”¹¹⁰

In Roman society, religion and politics were entangled, and Christians were caught in the middle of the fray.¹¹¹ Roman officials, as protectors of the state, tended toward religious conservatism, and emperors would label themselves as *conservatores patriae* (“preservers of the fatherland”) or *reparatores* (“restorers”).¹¹² Roman culture prized *pietas*, including a proper respect for the traditional gods and rituals, and Christians were perceived to be a threat to public piety.¹¹³ The phrase “the piety of the emperor” appeared on coins, and the emperor was perceived to be the ultimate example of the virtue of *pietas*.¹¹⁴ Romans came to worship the “genius” or divine spirit of emperors, so Christian refusal to worship the gods or emperor had political overtones. Many pagans would not have found distinctions, such as honoring the emperor but not worshiping him, to be convincing.¹¹⁵

Religion was intertwined with family life, social activity, and public order.¹¹⁶ The father, as the *paterfamilias*, acted as the chief priest for his family and household. The rise of Christianity was a disruptive force within nuclear and extended family relationships. “Many a pagan first heard of Christianity as the disintegrating force that had wrecked a neighbor’s home.”¹¹⁷ In the *Passion of Perpetua*, her father exhorts her, “Behold your brothers; behold your mother and your aunt; look at your son who cannot live without you.”¹¹⁸ The conversion of pagan wives especially confounded their hus-

bands.¹¹⁹

Early Christians often faced popular opposition.¹²⁰ Christians remained aloof from much of social life “because almost all aspects—athletics, entertainment, political affairs, and many commercial transactions—were permeated with idolatry.”¹²¹ Many Christians refused to participate in public festivals, social clubs or trade guilds, and the army (which, apart from questions of violence, was intertwined with popular religion).¹²² Christian leaders exhorted their congregations to stay away from gladiatorial fights and the theatre.¹²³ Early Christian literature reflects the internal debates about eating meat sacrificed to idols.¹²⁴ The growth of the Christian movement in a specific locale could impact the economy and adversely affect revenues tied to pagan worship.¹²⁵

Christians were accused of the specific faults of atheism, cannibalism, and incest.¹²⁶ Marcus Fronto, a civic leader in Rome, apparently tossed out such charges.¹²⁷ As those who had apostasized from the *mos maiorum* (“customs of the elders”), Christians were labeled as “atheists.”¹²⁸ Everett Ferguson explains, “Atheism in the ancient world was practical, not theoretical. An atheist was someone who did not observe the traditional religious practices, regardless of what faith he professed.”¹²⁹ The accusation of cannibalism was a common form of ancient slander, and its application was perhaps rooted in misunderstandings of the Eucharist (Lord’s Supper).¹³⁰ The charge was framed in the language of participating in “Thyestean feasts” (a label rooted in a story of Greek mythology, in which Thyestes unknowingly ate his own children when they were served to him).¹³¹ The charge of incest or engaging in sexual orgies was framed as engaging in “Oedipean intercourse” (a label rooted in another fable, that of Oedipus who killed his own father and slept with his own mother). The accusation may have arisen because Christians called one another “brother” or “sister,” spoke of their love for one another, and exchanged a “holy kiss” (kiss of peace) with fellow believers.¹³² Tertullian mocked the accusations brought against Christians: “Monsters of wickedness, we are accused of observing a holy rite in which we kill a little child and then eat it; in which, after the feast, we practice incest, the dogs—our pimps, no doubt—overturning the lights and providing us with the shamelessness of darkness for our impious lusts.”¹³³

Christians faced intellectual and philosophical, as well as popular, opposition.¹³⁴ “To philosophers and ordinary people alike, Christianity was not simply antisocial, ludicrous, immoral, and unpatriotic; it threatened the very stability of the world.”¹³⁵ Epictetus, the Stoic philosopher, was dismayed by the “madness (*mania*)” of the “Galileans” (Christians) in the face

of death.¹³⁶ Celsus argued that Christians could only convince the gullible, uncultured, and unintelligent: children, slaves, women, and the uneducated.¹³⁷ He treated Christians with intellectual scorn, protesting that they appealed to mere belief without rational demonstration. Celsus considered Christian martyrdom to be futile.¹³⁸ Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* critiques Christian "sheer opposition" and "histrionic display" in the face of death.¹³⁹ Lucian of Samosata, a second-century literary wit, satirized the Christian approach to imprisonment and martyrdom. Galen, the second-century physician, admired "the contempt of death" found among Christians, but he criticized their dependence upon "undemonstrated laws" and mere faith.¹⁴⁰ Aelius Aristides referred to "those impious people of Palestine" who have "defected from the Greek race," perhaps a reference to Christians.¹⁴¹ Porphyry, the late third-century philosopher, wrote against Christianity ("an irrational and unexamined faith"), including specific critiques of biblical materials.¹⁴² Porphyry's *Against the Christians* was "the largest, most learned and most dangerous of all the ancient literary attacks on Christianity."¹⁴³

Such critical literature was not "persecution," of course, although it sometimes motivated others to adopt a hostile stance.¹⁴⁴ The governor Sossianus Hierocles, "one of the most zealous of persecutors,"¹⁴⁵ drew from Porphyry's intellectual critiques and attacked "the easy credulity of Christians" in his own work.¹⁴⁶ In any case, several of these pagan critics mentioned Christian contempt of death (or otherwise implied their own awareness of Christian martyrdom).

Resultant Martyr Literature

Perhaps historians should wield a larger glossary of words, such as "persecution," "violent aggression," "oppression," "hostility," "slander," "injustice," "coercion," "restriction," "prejudice," and "social marginalization."¹⁴⁷ Perhaps a term broader than "persecution," such as "maltreatment" or "mistreatment" casts a more realistic net. Christians who were tortured or imprisoned were maltreated, and even confiscation of property is a form of hostility or oppression. On the other hand, although early Christians felt uneasy about intellectual or popular critiques, such opposition should not be termed "persecution" or even "maltreatment," but engagement expected in the public forum of ideas.

The persecution of Christians (whether intended, experienced, or perceived) led to literary output.¹⁴⁸ A direct result would be martyrdom stories, stylized narratives that idealized the martyrs and their sacrifice.¹⁴⁹ Early Christian martyrdom literature emphasized the perseverance and faithful confes-

sions of the martyrs.¹⁵⁰ Some martyrdom texts have been called *passiones* or *martyria* (narrating the last days of suffering), and some have been called *acta* or *gesta* (portraying judicial proceedings), although the boundaries between these “are at best fragile.”¹⁵¹ Historians agree that martyr texts are “highly stylized rewritings of earlier traditions”¹⁵² of constructed rhetorical strategy¹⁵³ that blend theology and history with communal lore,¹⁵⁴ as well as biblical materials and previous hagiographical traditions and typologies.¹⁵⁵

Scholarly evaluations of this mix of hagiography and history fall upon a spectrum.¹⁵⁶ Moss assesses the martyrdom literature to be filled with “forgeries,” “fabrications,” and “pious fictions.”¹⁵⁷ She believes that only six “authentic” martyrdom accounts exist among all the “pious chaff” and “forged weeds” (“these six accounts are as good as it is going to get”):¹⁵⁸ the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the *Acts of Ptolemy and Lucius*, the *Acts of Justin and Companions*, the *Letter of Lyons*, the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, and the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*.¹⁵⁹ Scholarship generally agrees with Moss that “no early Christian account has been preserved without emendation,” whether expanding or editing or otherwise transforming the materials and traditions (124).

Nevertheless, as Moss’ knife whittles away on these six texts, one seems left with little meat beyond the datum that dozens of Christians were executed. For instance, because we do not know with certainty what was said, “using modern standards of history—we cannot be sure that they were truly martyrs” (117). In Moss’ view, historians would have to know the missing “key element” of “whether at any point they were given the opportunity to deny Christ and live” (137). David Neff differs in his assessment: “Surely we can strip away some pious embroidery without employing a steely skepticism that reduces our certainty to the bare fact that some people were executed.”¹⁶⁰ For example, although legends accumulated around the death of Socrates, historians speak of facets of his demise.

Early martyrdom stories were often influenced by the images and deaths of Jesus and Stephen, the “proto-martyr.” The narratives of Daniel and his friends and of the Maccabee martyrs also influenced early Christian martyr literature,¹⁶¹ as did the figure of Socrates.¹⁶² Thus pre-Christian ways of narrating a “noble death” helped shape the early Christian narratives.¹⁶³ Although Christians were the first to use the Greek word *martus* of individuals who were killed for their faith, churches do not have a monopoly on martyrs, and the notion of martyrdom is not peculiar to Christianity.¹⁶⁴ Other religions and ideologies have their own martyrs who serve as motivating examples of personal commitment.¹⁶⁵

In addition to martyr accounts with their mix of fact and fiction, however, other early Christian texts also reflect experiences and concerns of maltreatment. One resulting literary genre was the *exhortation to martyrdom*, including examples written by Tertullian, Origen, and Cyprian.¹⁶⁶ The spectrum of opposition faced by Christians, ranging from violent suppression to intellectual critique, also motivated Christian apologetic writing. Justin Martyr, the most famous second-century apologist, earned his title through dying for his Christian faith.¹⁶⁷ Athenagoras wrote a *Plea for Christians* which responded to the accusations of atheism, cannibalism, and incest.¹⁶⁸ Minucius Felix's *Octavius*, written in Latin, responded to similar charges, and Tertullian also wrote a *Latin Apology*. The anonymous *Epistle to Diognetus* refers to the hostile mistreatment of Christians. Other early apologists included Quadratus, Aristides, Melito, Tatian, and Theophilus. The apologists argued for the superiority of monotheism over polytheism, responded to the "novelty" of Christians by rooting it in the antiquity of the Hebrew Scriptures, identified Jesus with the eternal *Logos*, and explained the supernatural wonders of paganism through attribution to demonic power.

Pagan opposition and even maltreatment is reflected in pagan literature as well. Moss interacts with the likes of Suetonius, Tacitus, Pliny, Trajan, Marcus Cornelius Fronto, Celsus, Porphyry, and Diocletian. Relevant materials from Epictetus, Hadrian, Marcus Aurelius, Lucian of Samosata, Galen, and others are also extant (see the discussion above).

Varied Effects

Moss rightly emphasizes that not all martyrs passively awaited and then accepted death.¹⁶⁹ Some actively sought out martyrdom, leading to "an astonishingly large number of volunteers."¹⁷⁰ These "volunteers" took the initiative by handing themselves over to authorities or even provoking them.¹⁷¹ According to Laurie Guy, "One analysis of martyrdoms in early fourth-century Palestine under Maximin indicates that of the 47 of Eusebius's list of 91 martyrs who could be classified, at least 13 were volunteers; at least 18 more drew attention to themselves without going so far as to demand martyrdom; thus only 16 at most were sought out by the local authorities."¹⁷² Tertullian narrated a case in which Christians voluntarily appeared before Arrius Antoninus, proconsul of the Roman province of Asia, desiring to be martyred. The proconsul executed some but brushed off the others, telling them if they really wanted to die they should simply jump off a cliff or go hang themselves.¹⁷³ According to Prudentius, during the "Great Persecution," a twelve-year-old girl named Eulalia spat in the face of the governor

and kicked over a pagan altar, and was consequently condemned to death.¹⁷⁴ Suicide often had noble connotations in the Greco-Roman world (cf. Socrates and Seneca), yet labeling “voluntary martyrdom” as “suicide” could belittle the role of the executor as willful agent in the execution.¹⁷⁵ “Voluntary martyrdom” only “works” when both the executed and the executor serve their respective, willing roles.

Another debated early Christian practice was flight in persecution. In particular, the flight of bishops during oppression led to ecclesiastical debates and strife. The church also had to deal with those who abandoned the faith during persecution. While some church members were executed during periods of persecution, others hid or fled, bribed officials, worked with sympathetic administrators, obtained or forged false *libelli*, or recanted their Christian faith.¹⁷⁶ The *stantes* never faced a situation of having to make a public choice.¹⁷⁷ *Traditores* were those who handed Scriptures over to authorities. The *lapsi* were those who denied the faith and then came back to the church, seeking reconciliation.¹⁷⁸ Large numbers of church members lapsed during the Decian persecution, for instance.¹⁷⁹ Various schisms, such as the Meletian, Novatianist, and Donatist schisms, centered upon the proper response to the lapsed (especially church leaders who had fallen away and then repented). A complex penitential system developed to address specific situations.

Other church members simply turned away from the faith (and became known as “apostates”). For example, the *Letter of Lyons* mentions about ten individuals who were “untrained, unprepared, and weak, unable to bear the strain of a great conflict.”¹⁸⁰ Cyprian complained of mass apostasy in Carthage in 250.¹⁸¹ Of the Diocletian era, Eusebius acknowledges that “some indeed, from excessive dread, broken down and overpowered by their terrors, sunk and gave way.”¹⁸²

Martyrdom affected the early Christian interpretation of biblical texts.¹⁸³ The maltreatment and persecution of Christians played a role in the development of doctrine, and Christian leaders used the heroic images of martyrs in the defense of their theologies.¹⁸⁴ Of course, the most direct result was the development of a theology of martyrdom,¹⁸⁵ and shifting emphases in the nature of Christian “witness,” or *martyria*.¹⁸⁶ Moreover, within early Christianity, suffering and martyrdom were intertwined with discussions of discipleship.¹⁸⁷

Martyrs were described in heroic terms, and martyrdom was portrayed as public spectacle, athletic event, or gladiatorial combat, but also as a cosmic struggle.¹⁸⁸ Many martyrdom texts draw from an apocalyptic worldview, fram-

ing personal events as battles between the forces of the Devil and the followers of Christ. Martyrs were described as *militi Christi* (“soldiers of Christ”), and “Christian authors utilized a rhetoric of paradox to declare this apparent defeat of Christians a victory for Christ.”¹⁸⁹ Yet for all their talk of cosmic conflict, battling the diabolic forces, and triumphing over the enemies, the earliest Christians also passed on a tradition of peace-mongering.¹⁹⁰

Martyrdom literature was meant to be didactic.¹⁹¹ Persecution and maltreatment, and the associated literature, caused Christian communities and individuals to re-consider their values. According to Eusebius, the martyrs “accounted a horrible death more precious than a fleeting life, and won all the garlands of victorious virtue.”¹⁹² Rodney Stark explains, “Martyrs are the most credible exponents of the value of a religion, and this is especially true if there is a voluntary aspect to their martyrdoms. By voluntarily accepting torture and death rather than defecting, a person sets the highest imaginable value upon a religion and communicates that value to others.”¹⁹³ Suffering could thus cause a re-evaluation of the nature of freedom. “In order to be free, the Christian had to be willing to lose physical freedom and life itself. After all, true liberty, true life, was manifested in its highest degree in ‘confession,’ and in martyrdom.”¹⁹⁴ Therefore, martyrdom literature became interlaced with ascetic discussions concerning the body, suffering, sacrifice, and pleasure.¹⁹⁵ “The monastic life was a daily martyrdom of asceticism, a heroic substitute for the heroism of the martyr.”¹⁹⁶

The death of martyrs was also described with eucharistic imagery, or referred to as a “second baptism” (cf. Mark 10:39; Luke 12:50).¹⁹⁷ Hippolytus referred to martyrdom as being baptized in one’s own blood, and Tertullian termed it “a second font.”¹⁹⁸ Martyrdom was also described as a “birth” into new life, and communities commemorated the “birthdays” (*natalicia*) of martyrs (the anniversaries of their deaths, their birthdays into immortality).¹⁹⁹ As those who shared in the suffering and victory of Jesus, martyrs were thought to be divinely elected to this role.²⁰⁰ As the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* states, the Lord “chooses his elect from among his own servants.”²⁰¹ Martyrdom was a way of imitating Christ (*imitatio Christi*), an evidence of personal identification and union with him.²⁰² The martyrs were proof that “the salvation drama was not confined to the biblical past, but continued to play out in the lives of Christians in the present world.”²⁰³

Early Christians also believed that the Holy Spirit was at work in the martyrs in a unique manner, allowing scholars to study the interface of martyrdom and pneumatology.²⁰⁴ Early Christians believed that the Holy Spirit testified through those who made a faithful confession before hostile

authorities (Matt 10:18–20; Mark 13:11; Luke 12:11–12). Confessors and martyrs sometimes claimed special visions or prophetic insights.²⁰⁵ “What mattered now was charism—a godly life and the evident presence of the Holy Spirit.”²⁰⁶ For example, the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* highlights the Spirit’s work and visionary experiences, and some scholars have argued for a Montanist influence upon the text.²⁰⁷

Martyrs were fast-tracked to heavenly reward.²⁰⁸ Cyprian wrote, “In persecutions ... death is brought in, but immortality follows; the world is taken away from the slain, but paradise is revealed to the redeemed.”²⁰⁹ Martyrs received a “crown” of reward.²¹⁰ Moss calls the view that martyrs died simply out of love for Jesus “overly simplistic,” maintaining “even if this is generally true it is not *universally* true” (212).²¹¹ Anne Thayer writes, “Some also had a vengeful streak, and saw themselves contributing to the defeat of Satan in a cosmic battle. Nor were martyrs free of self-interest.”²¹² Martyrdom literature often does speak of the eternal punishment of opponents.²¹³ And the assimilation of self-interest within religious motivation (and all motivation) is a complicated topic. One should not, however, necessarily pit statements about personal reward and the judgment of opponents against dying for one’s religious beliefs. Such doctrines, like leaving actual vengeance in God’s hands alone, were themselves religious convictions.²¹⁴

According to Tertullian, “the death of martyrs is praised in song.”²¹⁵ The celebration of martyrs led to hymnography and homiletic encomia and panegyrics.²¹⁶ Moss notes, “Martyrs were seductive figures because their willingness to suffer and die made them unimpeachable witnesses and persuasive representations of the church.”²¹⁷ Overall, perseverance in the face of hostility led to an alternate form of personal authority outside the parameters of office or ordination, as noted by Hippolytus.²¹⁸ “Confessors” (a term often applied to those who were imprisoned or tortured but not executed) carried clout in and among the churches.²¹⁹ Already in Tertullian’s day, confessors were thought to possess special powers of intercession. “No sooner has anyone put on bonds than adulterers beset him, fornicators gain access, prayers echo around him, pools of tears from sinners soak him.”²²⁰

Because many martyrs were women, persecution and martyrdom affected the role of women in the church, as texts elevated and idealized female martyrs, such as Blandina, Perpetua, and Felicitas.²²¹ The *Letter of Lyons* says of the young Blandina, “Then she too was sacrificed, and even the heathen themselves acknowledged that never in their experience had a woman endured so many and terrible sufferings.”²²² Scholars have explored the discussion of the “body” in martyr literature,²²³ the descriptions of female mar-

tyrs in masculinized ways²²⁴ and the phenomenon of the “modest” martyr.²²⁵

Many Christians believed that confessors and especially martyrs possessed a holy power.²²⁶ As Peter Brown has quipped, the martyrs were seen as “miracles in themselves.”²²⁷ According to Eusebius, martyrs demonstrated that “the power of God is always present to the aid of those who are obliged to bear any hardship for the sake of religion, to lighten their labours, and to strengthen their ardor.”²²⁸ Their bodies were seen as conduits of such power, and church members began to gather bodily relics and eventually to venerate them.²²⁹ “The race for bones and skin began early.”²³⁰ Christian texts sometimes cautioned (directly or indirectly) against a veneration of the martyrs that might compete with a focus upon Jesus Christ himself.²³¹

Both opposition and martyrdom played roles in the self-identity of Christians.²³² “The bitter disputes with the synagogues and the persecution at the hands of the Roman state did not simply change the exterior circumstances of the church. They also changed its internal characteristics: they influenced how Christians thought of themselves and of God’s plan for the world.”²³³ The telling and re-telling of martyr narratives helped form communities, through the role of collective memory.²³⁴ Many believed that persecution purified the church or formed a more faithful church.²³⁵ Maltreatment discouraged conversions of convenience and made churches reticent to accept members without due caution.²³⁶

Early Christian texts claim that persecution ultimately led to church growth, both in numbers and geographical dissemination.²³⁷ The Book of Acts declares, “Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.”²³⁸ Tertullian exaggerated, “For all who witness the noble patience of its martyrs, ... are inflamed with desire to examine the matter in question; and as soon as they come to know the truth, they straightway enroll themselves its disciples.”²³⁹ He famously declared, “Nor does your cruelty, however exquisite, get you anything. ... The oftener we are mowed down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.”²⁴⁰ The martyrs testified to the faith in a way that some pagans found convincing,²⁴¹ although pagan reactions to Christian martyrdom greatly varied, and many were less than impressed.²⁴²

Response

Martyrdom shaped the early church, and its memory continues to shape the church today. “Even when martyrdom ceased, it remained significant—in memory, in miracle, in inspiring self-sacrificing commitment in the service of Christ. In shaping the ongoing life of the church, the blood of the martyrs

was indeed seed.”²⁴³

Candida Moss’ provocative work engagingly continues this conversation. “*The Myth of Persecution* raises the consequential question of how we use historical scholarship in the construction of contemporary meaning and guidance.”²⁴⁴ The language of “persecution” can be emotionally charged, and the rhetorical “persecution” card has been overplayed in America, so that marginalization and even critique becomes “persecution.”²⁴⁵ In consequence, one senses a tenor of restricting persecution in the ancient world in order to disarm the rhetoric of “persecution” in the modern world.²⁴⁶ Moss fears that “the myth of persecution” leads inexorably to a combative stance, further conflict, and even the legitimization of retributive violence (3). She insists, “The use of this language of persecution is discursive napalm. It obliterates any sense of scale or moderation. This stymieing, dialogue-ending language is disastrous for public discourse, disastrous for politics, and results in a more deeply poisoned well for everyone.” The inflated rhetoric of victimization (of insiders) and demonization (of outsiders) works against mutual understanding, dialogue, and cooperation.

But is this the inevitable response to maltreatment, whether historical or contemporary?²⁴⁷ Can there be a responsible “constructive use” of the early Christian response to oppression? Ann Thayer responds, “It is not enough to recognize how the past has been, and continues to be, dangerously used. A more faithful narrative needs to replace it. How might the martyrological tradition become a gift within the body of Christ today, encouraging such virtues as costly discipleship, spiritual discernment, mutual recognition, and support?”²⁴⁸ Moss herself states, “We can choose to embrace the virtues that martyrs embody without embracing the false history of persecution and polemic that has grown up around them” (250). She specifically highlights such virtues as courage and endurance (260).

But I wish to underscore another lesson from early Christian literature: calls for religious liberty rooted in universal principles and motivated by mistreatment. Moss herself notes that Justin Martyr and Tertullian used “the rhetoric and ideals of the Roman Empire to make their case that Christians should be tolerated” (258). She adds, “Perhaps if we are to appeal to the history of persecution in the early church, this should be our model” (259).

As a keen example, Tertullian wrote in his *To Scapula*: “It is the law of mankind and the natural right of each individual to worship what he thinks proper, nor does the religion of one man either harm or help another. But, it is not proper for religion to compel men to religion, which should be ac-

cepted of one's own accord, not by force, since sacrifices also are required of a willing mind. So, even if you compel us to sacrifice, you will render no service to your gods."²⁴⁹ Other early Christian authors, such as Lactantius, also appealed to a universal principle of religious liberty.²⁵⁰ But Tertullian was the first author to coin the phrase "religious liberty (*libertas religionis*),"²⁵¹ and his discussion of religious liberty is rightly noted by some historians of religious tolerance.²⁵² Nevertheless, the mere notation of his thought does not do justice to his influence. My full telling of the story must appear elsewhere, but here is a brief plotline.²⁵³ Tertullian's plea was picked up by key defenders of religious liberty, including Sebastian Castellio (who opposed religious intolerance in sixteenth-century Geneva), Pieter Twisck (a Dutch Anabaptist), John Robinson (pastor of the Pilgrims), Leonard Busher (seventeenth-century author of *A Plea for Liberty of Conscience*), John Murton (another early Baptist proponent of religious freedom), Roger Williams (founder of Rhode Island), and William Penn (founder of Pennsylvania). Tertullian's discussion was also personally appreciated by Thomas Jefferson, the American founder.²⁵⁴

While Greg Carey fears that "the martyrdom myth encourages true believers to dismiss their opponents and their opponents' humanity," could not a humane appreciation of the reality of past persecution use such maltreatment as an argument for universal religious liberty (and not just freedom for one's own "in-group")? Even as the Hebrew Scriptures called upon Jews to remember the sojourner in their midst because they themselves had been sojourners in Egypt,²⁵⁵ could not Christians be called upon to remember maltreated religious minorities, because they themselves were a maltreated religious minority?

This is not, of course, to say that early Christians were themselves "innocent" in the matter of religious liberty in Late Antiquity. Tolerance is the "the loser's creed," the slogan of the underdog.²⁵⁶ Unfortunately, as Christians garnered power they themselves became persecutors.²⁵⁷ The Christianized empire of Late Antiquity turned on heretics, Jews, and pagans.²⁵⁸ But this merely underscores the importance of our discussion. If later Christianized emperors were motivated by their own concerns for political unity, could their policies be considered more political than religious? If they passed general laws that opposed pagan religiosity but also Jews and heretics, could their maltreatment of pagans be called prosecution rather than persecution? Should one narrow "persecution" to the actual execution of pagans, and then seek to assess the rhetoric of persecution by the exact number of pagans executed?

A plea for universal religious liberty can be informed by the local, sporadic, and real persecution of early Christians. Perhaps what humanity needs most is a sense of reciprocity or reversibility (as embodied in the “Golden Rule”) that applies to religious liberty, and that transcends the particularities of one’s contemporary socio-cultural context. Perhaps one may even speak of a response to maltreatment grounded in the teachings of the Gospels (Matt 5:38–48) and reiterated in the Epistles (Rom 12:14–21). Historians are called to a difficult but important task: to reexamine the past unflinchingly even if it challenges popular assumptions and traditions, while also considering an ethically responsible application of the reconstructed past.

¹ Laurie Guy, *Introducing Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 50.

² See http://www.rome-guide.it/english/monuments/monuments_catacombs.html.

³ Joseph Lynch, *Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 79.

⁴ Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2013). For a *Forschungsberichte* and “first read” entry into the field of martyrdom studies, see Candida Moss, “Current Trends in the Study of Early Christian Martyrdom,” *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* 41.3 (2012): 22–29. For a representation of her own scholarship on early Christian martyrdom, see Candida Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

⁵ Henry Carrigan, “Were Early Christians Really Persecuted?,” *Publishers Weekly* (April 23, 2013). Available at: <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/religion/article/56939-were-early-christians-really-persecuted-pw-talks-with-candida-moss.html>. Cf. Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 20.

⁶ For some representative introductions to early Christian martyrdom and persecution, see Arthur Mason, *The Historic Martyrs of the Primitive Church* (London: Longmans Green, 1905); Paul Allard, *Histoire des persecutions pendant les deux premiers siècles* (Paris: Gabalda, 1911); Leon Canfield, *The Early Persecutions of the Christians* (New York: AMS, 1913); Herbert Workman, *The Martyrs of the Early Church* (London: Kelly, 1913); Henri Grégoire, *Les persecutions dans l’empire romain* (2d ed.; Brussels: Palais des Académies, 1964); W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965); Élie Griffie, *Les persecutions contre les chrétiens aux I^{er} et II^{es} siècles* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1967); Jacques Moreau, *La persecution du christianisme dans l’Empire romain* (Paris: Presses universitaires des France, 1956); Hans Dieter Stöver, *Christenverfolgung in römischen Reich: ihre Hintergründe und Folgen* (Düsseldorf, Econ, 1982); Herbert Workman, *Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); Marta Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire* (trans. Annabel Bedini; Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986). Pierre Maraval, *Les persecutions durant les quatre premiers siècles du christianisme* (Paris: Desclée, 1992); G. W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Anne Bernet, *Les chrétiens dans l’Empire romain* (Paris: Perrin, 2003); G. E. M. De Ste Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy* (eds., Michael Whitby and Joseph Streeter; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁷ G. E. M. De Ste Croix, “Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?,” *Past and Present* 26 (1963), 7; cf. Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 159.

⁸ Everett Ferguson, *Church History*, vol. 1: *From Christ to the Pre-Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 160.

⁹ On the contextualization of martyrdom, see Anders Klostergaard Petersen and Jakob Engberg, “Finding Relevant Contexts for Early Christian Martyrdom,” in *Contextualising Early Christian Martyrdom* (eds., Jakob Engberg, et al.; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), 7–13.

¹⁰ See Gernot Wiessner, *Zur Märtyrerüberlieferung aus der Christenverfolgung Schapurs II* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967); Peter Heather, “Goths and Huns, c. 320–425,” in *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 13 (eds., Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 496–97.

¹¹ Lynch, *Early Christianity*, 88.

¹² Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 254–60.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 133–34.

¹⁴ I.e., Europeans could maltreat “Native Americans” in the closing years of the fifteenth century (even before the

appearance of the root term "America"). Cf. Moss' argument that Christians coined the term "martyr" but the conceptual reality already existed (Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 52).

- ¹⁵ Cf. Acts 9:1–2. Consider the 2010 Lutheran World Federation statement entitled "Action on the Legacy of Lutheran Persecution of 'Anabaptists.'"
- ¹⁶ Suetonius, *Claudius* 25.4. See Dixon Slingerland, "Chrestus: Christus?," in *The Literature of Early Rabbinic Judaism* (ed., Alan Avery-Peck; Lanham: University Press of America, 1989), 133–44.
- ¹⁷ See Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).
- ¹⁸ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue* 31.5.
- ¹⁹ Paul Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 226–31.
- ²⁰ Cf. George Townsend, *Ecclesiastical and Civil History* (London: Rivington, 1847), 128; Lactantius, *On the Deaths of Persecutors*.
- ²¹ For a chart merging martyrs (and purported martyrs) with imperial reigns, see Joyce Salisbury, *The Blood of the Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 205–208.
- ²² E. Theodor Klette, *Die Christenkatastrophe unter Nero* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1907).
- ²³ Ivor Davidson, *The Birth of the Church: From Jesus to Constantine, A.D. 30–312* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 192–93. Moss doubts the historicity of the Tacitan report (Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 138–39; 263 n. 4).
- ²⁴ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44; in James Stevenson, *A New Eusebius* [London: SPCK, 1987], 3.
- ²⁵ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44; in Stevenson, *New Eusebius*, 2.
- ²⁶ Suetonius, "Life of Nero" 16.2; in Suetonius, vol. 1, *The Lives of the Caesars* (trans. J. C. Rolfe; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939), 111.
- ²⁷ Dio Cassius, *Epitome* 67.14; in Stevenson, *New Eusebius*, 7.
- ²⁸ Roland Schütz, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes und Kaiser Domitian* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1933).
- ²⁹ Tertullian, *Apology* 5.4; cf. Melito of Sardis in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.26.9.
- ³⁰ *I Clement* 1.1; 7.1.
- ³¹ N. Clayton Croy, Review of *The Myth of Persecution*, *Review of Biblical Literature* 10 (Oct. 3, 2013).
- ³² For a summary, see Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (3d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 170.
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- ³⁶ Rudolf Freudenberger, *Das Verhalten der römischen Behörden gegen die Christen im 2. Jahrhundert* (Münich: Beck, 1969).
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- ³⁹ Candida Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 104; Candida Moss, "On the Dating of Polycarp: Rethinking the Place of the Martyrdom of Polycarp in the History of Christianity," *Early Christianity* 1 (2010): 539–74; Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 171–86.
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- ⁴⁹ J. W. Hargis, *Against the Christians: The Rise of Early Anti-Christian Polemic* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999).
- ⁵⁰ Lynch, *Early Christianity*, 88.
- ⁵¹ Patrick Healy, *The Valerian Persecution: A Study of the Relations between Church and State in the Third Century A.D.* (New York: Franklin, 1905).
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- ⁵⁴ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 8.1.
- ⁵⁵ Gallienus’ wife, the empress Salonia, may have been a Christian. See Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 144.
- ⁵⁶ Eusebius, *Martyrs of Palestine*, 100.2.
- ⁵⁷ Giuseppe Ricciotti, *The Age of Martyrs: Christianity from Diocletian to Constantine* (trans. Anthony Bull; Milwaukee: Bruce, 1959); Adalbert-Gautier Hamman, *Les Martyrs de la grande persecution, 304–311* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1979); G. E. M. De Ste Croix, “Aspects of the ‘Great’ Persecution,” in *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy* (ed., Michael Whitby and Joseph Streeter; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 35–78.
- ⁵⁸ Stark, *Triumph of Christianity*, 145.
- ⁵⁹ Timothy Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 24.
- ⁶⁰ Lactantius, *On the Deaths of Persecutors*, 10.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 11–13.
- ⁶² See Stevenson, *New Eusebius*, 309–310; Vincent Twomey, *The Great Persecution* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2009). For material evidence, see W. M. Calder, *Some Monuments of the Great Persecution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1924); Annemarie Luijendijk, “Papyri from the Great Persecution: Roman and Christian Perspectives,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16 (2008): 341–69.
- ⁶³ Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 494–505.
- ⁶⁴ Guy, *Introducing Early Christianity*, 52.
- ⁶⁵ Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 537.
- ⁶⁶ Galerius may have died before the second mandate was published (Novak, *Christianity and the Roman Empire*, 154).
- ⁶⁷ Eusebius relates an account of ninety-seven maimed Christians, including children, being taken to the mines at Maximinus Daia’s command (see White, *Emergence of Christianity*, 26).
- ⁶⁸ Charles Freeman, *A New History of Early Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 213; Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 85, estimates that there were about five million Christians in A.D. 300; cf. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), 7; Stark, *Triumph of Christianity*, 147.
- ⁶⁹ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 164–66.
- ⁷⁰ Allen Brent, *A Political History of Early Christianity* (London: T & T Clark, 2009), 251–76.
- ⁷¹ Anne Thayer, Review of *The Myth of Persecution, Interpretation* 68 (2014): 82.
- ⁷² Croy, Review of *The Myth of Persecution*.
- ⁷³ Greg Carey, Review of *The Myth of Persecution, Christian Century* 130 (2013): 40.
- ⁷⁴ Léonce Cezard, *Histoire juridique des persecutions contre les Chétiens des Néron a Septime-Sévère (64 à 202)* (Rome: Bretschneider, 1967); Timothy Barnes, “Legislation against the Christians,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 58 (1968): 32–50.
- ⁷⁵ See De Ste Croix, “Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?,” 6–38; G. E. M. De Ste Croix, “Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted? A Rejoinder,” *Past and Present* 27 (1964): 28–33.
- ⁷⁶ Davidson, *Birth of the Church*, 193.
- ⁷⁷ See Tertullian, *Apology* 21.2.
- ⁷⁸ A. N. Sherwin-White, “The Early Persecutions and Roman Law Again,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 3 (1952): 199–213; A. N. Sherwin White, “Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?—An Amendment,” *Past and Present* 27 (1964), 23–27.
- ⁷⁹ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, chapter 5; Freeman, *New History of Early Christianity*, 208.
- ⁸⁰ Pliny, *Letters* 10.96; *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9–12.
- ⁸¹ Jonathan Hill, *Christianity: How a Despised Sect from a Minority Religion Came to Dominate the Roman Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 138–39.
- ⁸² Paul Hartog, “Greco-Roman Understanding of Christianity,” in *The Routledge Companion to Early Christian Thought*

- (ed., D. Jeffrey Bingham; London: Routledge, 2010), 52.
- ⁸³ Origen, *Against Celsus* 8.65; in ANF 4:664.
- ⁸⁴ Origen claimed that the martyrs in his day were “easily numbered,” although one must take his apologetic purpose into consideration (Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.8).
- ⁸⁵ Lynch, *Early Christianity*, 124; cf. 88.
- ⁸⁶ Guy, *Introducing Early Christianity*, 78.
- ⁸⁷ Hill, *Christianity*, 125. See also Moss, *Myth of Persecutions*, 160.
- ⁸⁸ Paul Holloway, *Coping with Prejudice: 1 Peter in Social-Psychological Perspective* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 2009), 36.
- ⁸⁹ Tertullian, *To Scapula* 5.
- ⁹⁰ Peter Lampe, *Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (London: Continuum, 2003), 336.
- ⁹¹ White, *Emergence of Christianity*, 24.
- ⁹² Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.34; 7.10.3. See John York, “The Image of Philip the Arab,” *Historia* 21 (1972): 320–32; Crouzel, “Le christianisme de l’empereur Philippe l’arabe,” *Gregorianum* 56 (1975): 545–50; Hans Pohlsander, “Philip the Arab and Christianity,” *Historia* 29 (1980): 463–73. The fact that Eusebius includes this demonstrates that Eusebius himself did not believe or push a “Sunday School myth” of three hundred years of continuous persecution.
- ⁹³ Hill, *Christianity*, 125.
- ⁹⁴ See G. E. M. De Ste Croix, “Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?,” 6–38.
- ⁹⁵ 1 Pet 4:14–16.
- ⁹⁶ Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 4.4. David Horrell, “The Label Χριστιανός: 1 Peter 4:16 and the Formation of Christian Identity,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126 (2007): 361–81.
- ⁹⁷ Unfortunately, the references to the *Acts of Justin and Companions* in Hartog, *Polycarp’s Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp* do not differentiate the various recensions.
- ⁹⁸ See W. H. C. Frend, “Martyrdom and Political Oppression,” in *The Early Christian World*, vol. 2 (ed., Philip Esler; London: Routledge, 2000).
- ⁹⁹ *Letter of Lyons and Vienne* 5.1; in Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 63.
- ¹⁰⁰ See W. H. C. Frend, “Martyrdom and Political Oppression,” in *The Early Christian World*, vol. 2 (ed., Philip Esler; London: Routledge, 2000), 826.
- ¹⁰¹ Guy, *Introducing Christianity*, 51.
- ¹⁰² Origen, *Against Celsus* 8.2; in Stephen Benko, *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984), 155.
- ¹⁰³ Sherwin-White, “Early Persecutions.”
- ¹⁰⁴ In *On the True Doctrine* 1, in R. Joseph Hoffmann, *Celsus: On the True Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 53.
- ¹⁰⁵ Origen, *Against Celsus* 2.52–53; 8.9.
- ¹⁰⁶ Minucius Felix, *Octavian* 10; in Hill, *Christianity*, 111.
- ¹⁰⁷ Stark, *Triumph of Christianity* 140–41.
- ¹⁰⁸ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 171.
- ¹⁰⁹ Stark, *Triumph of Christianity*, 142.
- ¹¹⁰ Tertullian, *Apology* 40.2; in ANF 3:47.
- ¹¹¹ Grant, *Early Christianity and Society*.
- ¹¹² See Claude Lepelley, *L’empire romain et le christianisme* (Paris: Flammarion, 1969); Joachim Mollhagen, *Der römische Staat und die Christen im zweiten und dritten Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970); Wolf-Dieter Hauschild, *Der römische Staat und die Frühe Kirche* (2d. ed.; Gütersloh, Mohr, 1977); Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Everett Ferguson (ed.), *Church and State in the Early Church* (New York: Garland, 1993); Paul Keresztes, *Imperial Rome and the Christians*, 2 vols. (Lanham: University Press of America, 1989).
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- ¹¹⁹ See 1 Pet 3:1–2; Justin Martyr, *Second Apology* 2; cf. 1 Cor 7:12–16.
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- ¹²¹ Ferguson, *Church History*, 67.
- ¹²² George Kalantzis, *Caesar and the Lamb: Early Christian Attitudes on War and Military Service* (Eugene: Cascade, 2012).
- ¹²³ See Tertullian, *On the Shows*; Novatian, *On the Shows*.
- ¹²⁴ 1 Cor 8–10, Acts 15:28–29, Rev 2:14, 20.
- ¹²⁵ See Acts 19; Pliny, *Letters* 10.96.
- ¹²⁶ Responses to the charges appear in the *Letter of Lyons*, Athenagoras, Minucius Felix.
- ¹²⁷ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 9.6; Benko, "Pagan Criticism of Christianity," 1081–89; T. D. Barnes, "Pagan Perceptions of Christianity," in *Early Christianity: Origins and Evolution to A.D. 400* (eds., Ian Hazlett and W. H. C. Frend; London: SPCK, 1991), 233–34.
- ¹²⁸ Adolf von Harnack, et al., *Der Vorwurf des Atheismus in den drei ersten Jahrhunderten* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1905).
- ¹²⁹ Ferguson, *Church History*, 67. For example, Epicureans, who believed that the gods existed but did not interfere with human affairs, often evaded the traditional rituals and were therefore called "atheists."
- ¹³⁰ Andrew McGowan, "Eating People: Accusations of Cannibalism against Christians in the Second Century," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1994): 413–42.
- ¹³¹ Agnès Nagy, *Les repas de Thyeste: l'accusation d'anthropologie contre les chrétiens au 2^e siècle* (Debrecen: University of Debrecen, 2000).
- ¹³² The rhetoric of such accusations is difficult to entangle. A few scholars believe that charges of immorality arose because outsiders failed to distinguish between the "Great Church" and libertine Gnostics (see Benko, *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians*, 67–73).
- ¹³³ Tertullian, *Apology* 7; in *ANF* 3:23, modernized.
- ¹³⁴ See Hartog, "Graeco-Roman Understanding of Christianity," 51–67; Michael Simmons, "Graeco-Roman Philosophical Opposition," in *The Early Christian World*, vol. 2 (ed., Philip Esler; London: Routledge, 2000), 840–68.
- ¹³⁵ Hill, *Christianity*, 114.
- ¹³⁶ Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.1.3. See George Long and John Lancaster Spalding, *Discourses of Epictetus* (New York: Appleton, 1904), xiii.
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- ¹³⁹ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 11.3. Some have maintained that the passage is an interpolation.
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- ¹⁴¹ Aelius Aristides, *Orations* 3.671; in Charles Allison Behr, *Aelius Aristides: The Complete Works*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 275. See Benko, "Pagan Criticism of Christianity," 1098.
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- ¹⁴³ Barnes, "Pagan Perceptions of Christianity," 238.
- ¹⁴⁴ Digeser, *Threat to Public Piety*.
- ¹⁴⁵ Alan Bowman, "Diocletian and the First Tetrarchy, A.D. 284–305," in *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 12 (ed., Alan Bowman, et al.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 86.
- ¹⁴⁶ Eusebius, *Against Hierocles* 2; in Simmons, "Graeco-Roman Philosophical Opposition," 849; cf. Timothy Barnes, "Sossianus Hierocles and the Antecedents of the Great Persecution," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 80 (1976): 239–52.
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- ¹⁵³ Erin Ronse, "Rhetoric of Martyrs: Listening to Saints Perpetua and Felicitas," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14 (2006): 283–327.
- ¹⁵⁴ André Jean Festugière, "Lieux communs littéraires et thèmes de folk-lore dans l'hagiographie primitive," *Wiener Studien* 73 (1960): 123–52; Felice Lifshitz, "Beyond Positivism and Genre: Hagiographical Texts as Historical Narrative," *Viator* 25 (1994): 95–113; Claudia Rapp, "Storytelling as Spiritual Communication in Early Greek Hagiography: The Use of *Diegesis*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998): 431–48.
- ¹⁵⁵ Victor Saxer, *Bible et Hagiographie* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1986); Victor Saxer, "Aspects de la typologie martyriale: Récits, portrait et personnages," in *Les fonctions des saints dans le monde occidental (III^e–IV^e siècle)* (ed., Jean-Yves Tilliette; Rome: École française de Rome, 1991), 321–31; Marc Van Uytvanghe, "L'hagiographie: un 'genre' chrétien ou antique tardif?," *Analecta Bollandiana* 111 (1993), 135–88; Guy Philippart, "L'hagiographie comme littérature: concept récent et nouveaux programmes?" *Revue des sciences humaines* 251 (1998): 11–39; Jonathan Yates, "The Use of the Bible in the North African Martyrological Polemics of Late Antiquity," in *Martyrdom and Persecution in Late Antique Christianity* (ed., Johan Leemans; Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 393–419.
- ¹⁵⁶ Hippolytus Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints: An Introduction to Hagiography* (trans. Virginia Crawford; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1961). Cf. the series of articles titled "Notiunculae Martyrologicae" that have periodically appeared in *Vigiliae Christianae*, authored by Jan den Boeft and Jan Bremmer.
- ¹⁵⁷ For example, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is a "pious fraud" (Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 104).
- ¹⁵⁸ Cf. E. C. E. Owen, *Some Authentic Acts of the Early Martyrs* (London: SPCK, 1933); Klaus Gamber, *Sie gaben Zeugnis: Authentische Berichte über Märtyrer der Frühkirche* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1982).
- ¹⁵⁹ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 92.
- ¹⁶⁰ David Neff, "Real Martyrs Don't Murder," *Christianity Today* 57.6 (Aug. 29, 2013): 80.
- ¹⁶¹ Othmar Perler, "Das vierte Makkabäerbuch, Ignatius von Antiochien und der ältesten Märtyrerberichte," *Rivista di archeologia cristiana* 25 (1949): 47–72; Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, *Christian Memories of the Maccabean Martyrs* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
- ¹⁶² Geert Roskam, "The Figure of Socrates in the Early Christian *Acta Martyrum*," in *Martyrdom and Persecution in Late Antique Christianity* (ed., Johan Leemans; Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 241–56; Johannes Geffcken, "Die christlichen Märtyrien," *Hermes* 45 (1910), 500–501. Moss also references the figures of Lucretia, Achilles, and Iphigeneia.
- ¹⁶³ See David Seeley, *The Noble Death: Graeco-Roman Martyrology and Paul's Concept of Salvation* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990); Arthur Droge and James Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992); Jan Willem van Henten and Friedrich Avemarie, *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2002); Jan Willem van Henten, "Noble Death and Martyrdom in Antiquity," in *Martyriumsvorstellungen in Antike und Mittelalter* (eds., Sebastian Fuhrmann and Regina Grundmann; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 85–110.
- ¹⁶⁴ Marie-Françoise Baslez, *Les persécutions dans l'antiquité* (Paris: Fayard, 2007).
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- ¹⁶⁶ See also Annewies van den Hoek, "Clement of Alexandria on Martyrdom," *Studia Patristica* 26 (1993): 324–41.
- ¹⁶⁷ Cf. Paul Parvis, "Justin, Philosopher, and Martyr," in *Justin Martyr and his Worlds* (eds., Sara Parvis and Paul Parvis; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 22–37; Paul Keresztes, "Law and Arbitrariness in the Persecution of the Christians and Justin's First Apology," *Vigiliae Christianae* 18 (1964): 204–214.
- ¹⁶⁸ Athenagoras, *Plea for the Christians* 21.
- ¹⁶⁹ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 191–96; see also Candida Moss, "The Discourse of Voluntary Martyrdom: Ancient and Modern," *Church History* 81 (2012): 531–51.
- ¹⁷⁰ G. E. M. De Ste Croix, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?," 22.
- ¹⁷¹ See William Tabbernee, "Early Montanism and Voluntary Martyrdom," *Colloquium* 17 (1985): 33–44; G. E. M. De Ste Croix, "Voluntary Martyrdom in the Early Church," in *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy* (eds., Michael Whitby and Joseph Streeter; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 153–200.
- ¹⁷² Guy, *Introducing Early Christianity*, 53, borrowing from De Ste Croix, "Aspects of the Great Persecution," 65.
- ¹⁷³ Tertullian, *To Scapula* 5.
- ¹⁷⁴ Prudentius, *Peristephanon* 3.
- ¹⁷⁵ On suicide and martyrdom, see Nils Arne Pedersen, "'A Prohibition So Divine': The Origins of the Christian Ban on Suicide," in *Contextualising Early Christian Martyrdom* (eds., Jakob Engberg, et al.; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), 139–203.
- ¹⁷⁶ The *sacrificati* were those who sacrificed and the *libellatici* were those who had purchased a certificate (*libellum*).
- ¹⁷⁷ Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*, 3.
- ¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷⁹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.41.

- ¹⁸⁰ *Letter of Lyons* 5.1.11; in Musurillo, *Early Christian Martyrs*, 65.
- ¹⁸¹ Cyprian, *On the Lapsed* 8–9.
- ¹⁸² Eusebius, *Martyrs of Palestine* 1; in Stark, *Triumph of Christianity*, 147.
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- ²³⁹ Tertullian, *To Scapula* 5; in ANF 3:107–108.
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- ²⁴² Jakob Engberg, "Martyrdom and Persecution—Pagan Perspectives on the Prosecution and Execution of Christians

- c. 110–210 AD,” in *Contextualising Early Christian Martyrdom* (eds., Jakob Engberg, et al.; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), 93–117.
- ²⁴³ Guy, *Introducing Early Christianity*, 81.
- ²⁴⁴ Thayer, Review of *The Myth of Persecution*, 83.
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- ²⁴⁶ Some reviewers have been severe in this critique: “While conservative Christian rhetoric is sometimes guilty of excesses, this book swings hard in the opposite direction, revising history and denying much of the evidence for early Christian persecution” (Croy, Review of *The Myth of Persecution*).
- ²⁴⁷ Consider the cautions against an “us-vs-them” mentality, resentment, bitterness, and lack of self-critique, as found in a recent discussion of the maltreatment of Christians in contemporary India (K. V. Georgekutty and R. H. Lesser, *A Grain of Wheat* [Delhi: ISPCK, 2006], 77).
- ²⁴⁸ Thayer, Review of *The Myth of Persecution*, 83.
- ²⁴⁹ Tertullian, *To Scapula 2*; in Rudolph Arbesmann, et al., *Tertullian: Apologetical Works and Minucius Felix: Octavius* (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1950); see also Tertullian, *Apology 28*.
- ²⁵⁰ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 5.13–20; see Paul Hartog, “Religious Liberty and the Early Church,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 17 (2012): 63–78.
- ²⁵¹ Tertullian, *Apology 24*.
- ²⁵² For the sake of the present article, one example will do: E. Gregory Wallace, “Justifying Religious Freedom: The Western Tradition,” *Penn State Law Review* 114 (2009): 502–504.
- ²⁵³ I wish to express thanks for a Lynn E. Mays research grant to investigate the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Tertullian’s discussions of religious liberty, especially among early Baptists.
- ²⁵⁴ Robert Wilken, “Christianity and Freedom: Historical Perspectives,” presentation at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, & World Affairs, Georgetown University, December 14, 2012. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RLzIW4llu8>.
- ²⁵⁵ Ex 22:21; 23:9; Deut 10:19
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- ²⁵⁸ Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100–400)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2008); H. A. Drake, “Intolerance, Religious Violence and Political Legitimacy in Late Antiquity,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79 (2011), 193–235.