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Death and Martyrdom: An Important Aspect of Early Christian Eschatology

William C. Weinrich

Under the emperor Commodus, toward the end of the second century, a wealthy Roman by the name of Apollonius was arrested on the charge that he was a Christian. The extant account of his martyrdom reports that when Apollonius was brought before the court, the proconsul, Perennis, inquired of Apollonius: "Apollonius, are you a Christian?" To this question Apollonius responded: "Yes, I am a Christian, and for that reason I worship and fear the God who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them."¹ This response of Apollonius, which at first appears so self-evident and natural, in fact implicitly contains a thorough theology of martyrdom not uncommon in the early church. Indeed, it is my conviction that this early theology of martyrdom provides us with a helpful entree to a reflection on the nature and meaning of death, most especially of the death of the Christian. At a time when in our own culture the reality of death is increasingly trivialized and made simply a matter of one's own choice, and at a time when the activist generation of the 1960's is entering into its "golden" years, the question "what does it mean to die" comes more and more to center stage and, I suspect, will be a major focus of the church's proclamation in the next quarter century.

We begin with a few simple observations. Martyrdom consists of the death imposed on one who wills to remain constant in his confession of faith, rather than to deny that confession. Martyrdom entails death; only that one who dies for the faith is called a "martyr."² However, and this is a second observation, the death imposed on the martyr is the result of a judgment to death. And a third observation: the judgment to death

¹All citations from the *Acts of the Martyrs* are from Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972). *Martyrdom of Apollonius 2* (Musurillo, *Acts*, 91). The martyrdom of Apollonius may be dated about A.D. 180.

²By the end of the second century a distinction was clearly drawn between those who were "martyrs" and those who were "confessors." The "martyr" had confessed and been put to death for the confession; the "confessor" had confessed but had not suffered death. See *The Letter of the Lyons Martyrs*: "They were indeed martyrs, whom Christ has deigned to take up in their hour of confession, putting his seal on their witness by death" (Eusebius, *History of the Church* 5.2.3; Musurillo, *Acts*, 83).

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imposed on the martyr is due to the refusal of the martyr to confess and to sacrifice to false gods. Confession of faith, rejection of idolatry, and judgment to death—these are the irreducible components of every martyrdom. It is precisely with these aspects of martyrdom in view that the witness of Apollonius before the Roman magistrate raises interesting questions. As Apollonius faced the penalty of death, one might suppose that the confession he would make would be an explicit confession in the hope of the resurrection from the dead. One might assume that a confession of the second article, something like “I believe in Jesus the Christ who was raised from dead,” would be more appropriately relevant to the context of persecution and martyrdom. However, the confession of Apollonius was that of the first article of the creed; it was a confession that the true God is the creator of all things. This feature is not unique to the witness of Apollonius. It is characteristic of many acts of the martyrs that come from the first three centuries of the church’s history.³ Such a confession in the Creator that is confessed in the context of one’s own death reminds us that the reality of death raises the question of what it means to be a creature who lives and who can die. It raises the question of what it means for God to be our creator.

An ancient and a modern heresy that the church again must combat is the view that death is natural. Such a view regards death as the last act of life, and as such, death is something over which we dispose. Such a view could not be further from biblical understanding. The Bible begins, not with a living man as though man lived self-evidently, but the Bible begins with the Creator, who speaks into existence man, who is made to exist by being made to live. Life is, therefore, a gift. Life, therefore, is not, so to speak, ‘natural’ to us. It comes to us from the outside, from God, so that even that which most “belongs” to us, namely our life, is itself not our own proper possession. Precisely in our being made alive, our relationship with God is both begun and revealed: He is our creator, and we are His creatures. To live is to be created. For this reason, Irenaeus could write that “the glory of God is a living man,” for in the life of man, the living God who makes by making alive is manifested. This “making alive,” however, also reveals a will to make alive. It is God’s will that man live. While this is implicit in the creation story itself, it is made

³For example, the *Martyrdom of Justin* 2.5 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 43); *Martyrdom of Carpus* 10 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 23); *Martyrdom of Pionius* 8 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 147); *Acts of Cyprian* 1 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 169); *Martyrdom of Fructuosus* 2 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 179).

explicit in the *Wisdom of Solomon*: "God created man for incorruption (ἐπ' ἀφθαρσίᾳ), and made him in the image of His own eternity" (2:23). When, therefore, the early church spoke of God's creating, it spoke of God creating *ex nihilo*, "from nothing," and by that phrase the church meant that God creates purely by His will and command. A living man is the direct expression of the will and command of God.

This conjunction of man's life and God's will introduces us to a significant element in biblical thinking and the theology of martyrdom, namely, that man's life entails his obedience to God. Or, perhaps we may say the same thing in this way: man's faith that God is his creator manifests itself in man's obedience to God's will. Typical of the biblical thematic is the fact that even before the fall the command of God is present: you may eat of all the trees of the garden, but in the day that you eat of the tree in the midst of the garden, you shall die (Genesis 2:15 and following; 3:1-5). Obedience to this command was to be the form of man's freedom from death, and in obedience to this command man would manifest his faith that God was his creator, that is, that his life came from God alone. This is clear from the words of the Tempter, who gave words that were in opposition to the words of God: "you will not die, if you eat of the tree" (Genesis 3:4-5). Satan does not merely invite man to disobedience against an abstract commandment; he rather invites man to regard the source of his life to lie elsewhere than in God. In effect, Satan establishes a will that is contrary to the will of God and gives itself voice by a contrary claim concerning the source of man's life. For this reason sin, whose chief aspect is disobedience, leads to death. Sin is itself fundamentally the refusal to believe that our life comes from God and exists in God. Sin leads man to regard something else or someone else other than God to be the source of his life. And so, man the sinner necessarily becomes the seeker after idols, other gods, who are incapable of making alive because they themselves are creatures who possess no life in themselves but receive their own existence and life from God, the Creator. For this reason, the worship of false gods manifests the dominion of death. The conjunction of disobedience, idolatry, and death occurs in the following passage of the *Wisdom of Solomon*: "Do not invite death by the error of your life [disobedience], nor bring on destruction by the works of your hands [idolatry]" (1:12).⁴

⁴This part of the discussion owes much to Gustav Wingren, *Creation and Law*, translated by Ross Mackenzie (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), 43-82.

However, the death that comes through sin and idolatry is not simply a logical result of sin and idolatry. Death comes *to me*, and so death itself is also external to me and comes from another. This is simply to say that death is a power, and its power is personal, that is, the power of death exists in its capacity to lie and to deceive. Death makes the claim that it is final and that those who dispose over death have a rightful claim to our allegiance. Paul can, therefore, call death the "last enemy" (1 Corinthians 15:26). It is an enemy that must not be simply assuaged; it is an enemy that must be destroyed, for behind death is Satan, the "prince of this world." Death then presents man once more with the temptation to sin, for it invites man to doubt that God remains the good creator of our life even in the midst of death, and so it invites man to bend the knee to those who would kill us.

But death is a power also in another sense. It is a power because behind death there is the God who judges the disobedience of man. The power of death also lies in the fact that it is the judgment of that true God, who is the Creator, who makes by making alive, and who can, therefore, also kill by taking life away. Regarded in this manner, death is, paradoxically if you will, a revelation, to those who can see it, that the God who judges with death is none other than that God who is the creator of all things.⁵ Such a judgment to death can neither be avoided nor ameliorated, for the judgment of death puts an end to my life precisely because it is a judgment over the entirety of my life. And because it is a judgment over the entirety of my life, death involves the loss of all things that have been received and possessed throughout the duration of my life: we have brought nothing into this world, and we will certainly take nothing out of it. However, it is exactly here that we must recall once more that the God who judges to death, is none other than the creator of all things, whose will is to make by making alive. In the judgment to death that God gives to man lies hidden the will of God to make alive, for in the death of man God condemns and destroys that which has separated man from God and which has elicited man's death. That is to say, in death God puts an end to sin and to the false autonomy

⁵It is suggestive in this context that the Bible can depict the judgment of God as a return to that chaos out of which God created the world. See, for example, Jeremiah 4:23-26 (verse 23: *tohu wabohu*); 5:20-25.

of man that exists in sin.⁶ Death makes laughable the claim that the life of man is possessed by the things of the world or by the princes of the earth, and for this reason death reveals idolatry for what it in fact is, a false worship arising from and issuing into death because the gods worshiped in idolatry are no gods at all. Death, then, precisely as *God's* judgment, is the work of His will to make alive and to re-establish His status as *our* God, to whom alone we give honor and praise. Our death, as the judgment of God the Creator, invites and demands our confession that the One who wills our death is none other than the creator of all things, who makes by making alive. The context of death becomes then the occasion for faith and right worship; it becomes the occasion for the confession that God is the creator of all things.

It is evident that the theology of martyrdom in the early church was conceived in the context of such a creation faith. Not surprisingly, the narratives of early martyrdoms are stories of conflict, and in such stories there is no neutral ground. Here one is either to sacrifice to the gods or one is not to sacrifice; one is either to confess or one is to deny; one is either to live or one is to die. Vilmos Vajta reminds us that, for Luther, the First Commandment establishes the fundamental claim of all true worship, "I am your God."⁷ This is also true of early Christian stories of persecution and martyrdom. However, there are two questions that are raised by this claim: Who is this God who makes such a claim upon us, and how does one make precisely this God one's own god? Within the acts of the martyrs the first of these questions receives this form: who has the power to give and to take away life? In the acts of the martyrs, the answer is that the one who has the power to give life and to take life away is God, the creator of all things, who makes the dead to live. And, how does one make precisely this God to be one's own god? In the acts of the martyrs the answer to this question is: one makes this God to be one's own god by dying in the confession that one is a Christian, "I am a Christian."

The character of martyrdom as a conflict between God and the false gods is evident from the interrogations of the martyr by the Roman officials and by the responses that the martyrs give. In the *Martyrdom of*

⁶Wingren, *Creation and Law*, 76.

⁷Vilmos Vajta, *Die Theologie des Gottesdeinstes bei Luther* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1952), 3-10.

Polycarp we are told that, after Polycarp had been brought into the arena, the governor said to him: "Swear [to the gods] and I will let you go. Curse Christ." To this Polycarp answered: "For eighty-six years I have been his servant and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme against my king and savior?"⁸ In the *Martyrdom of Apollonius* the proconsul, Perennis, exhorts Apollonius to sacrifice to the gods and to the image of the emperor Commodus. When Apollonius refuses, Perennis says: "I shall grant you a day's time, that you may take some thought about your life." Upon the continuing steadfastness of Apollonius, Perennis urges: "I advise you to change your mind and to venerate and worship the gods which we all venerate and worship, and to continue to live amongst us." Apollonius responds: "It is the God of the heavens whom I worship, and him alone do I venerate, who breathed into all men a living soul and daily pours life into all."⁹ To mention but one more example, in the *Martyrdom of Pionius*, the presbyter, Pionius, and others are arrested and reminded of "the emperor's edict commanding us to sacrifice to the gods." To this Pionius responds: "We are aware of the commandment of God ordering us to worship him alone," to which Sabina and Asclepiades add: "We obey the living God." To this the official, one Polemon, responds: "It would be wise for you to obey and offer sacrifice like everyone else, so that you may not be punished."¹⁰

It is clear from these interchanges that the question in play is this: "Who has the power to give and to take away life?" For their part the Roman magistrates believe that they do; they have the authority to stay execution and to release from prison and they have the authority to effect execution upon the Christian. And in this context of persecution and martyrdom the fact that the question "who has the power to give and to take away life" allows no neutral stance becomes clear. Faith is directed either toward the gods, or it is directed toward God the Creator. The question of life or death is nothing other than the question concerning who is the true God. By refusing to offer sacrifice to the gods, the martyr, in effect, rejects the claim of the magistrates that they possess the power to give life and confesses, rather, that it is God the Creator and He alone

⁸*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 9).

⁹*Martyrdom of Apollonius* 10-13 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 93, 95).

¹⁰*Martyrdom of Pionius* 2.2-4; 4.1 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 139).

who possesses this power.¹¹ The life that the magistrate offers in exchange for sacrifice to the gods is, in fact, a verdict of death, for such gods are no gods, having no life in them. Thus, when Perennis asks Apollonius to sacrifice to the gods so that he might continue to live, Apollonius responds: "I am a pious man, and I may not worship idols made with hands. Therefore, I do not bow before gold or silver, bronze or iron, or before false gods made of stone or wood, who can neither see nor hear: for these are but the work of craftsmen, workers in gold and bronze; they are the carving of men and have no life of their own."¹² Similarly, when Carpus is commanded to sacrifice to the gods, he responds: "May the gods be destroyed who have not made heaven and earth." And upon further pressure to sacrifice, he says: "The living do not offer sacrifice to the dead."¹³

Idolatry is a form that the dominion of death assumes, and to worship idols is to die. Therefore, when the martyr willingly receives the judgment of death from the hands of the earthly power and takes this judgment upon himself, he confesses that the one, true, and only God is God the Creator, who alone makes all things and who will also make him alive from the dead. And this confession is not only the confession of the mouth; it is precisely a confession made in the confessor's death. In their death itself, the martyr acknowledges that God is the creator, who creates by making alive, and therefore, in their death itself, the martyr makes a witness against false gods who have no life in themselves and thus cannot make alive. In the act of martyrdom itself the real and proper relationship between God and the world is revealed. The martyr's death witnesses to the fact that the only source of man's life and hope is God Himself. Martyrdom reveals the living God. That is, martyrdom reveals the living God to those to whom it is given to see it. In the *Martyrdom of Fructuosus*, it is reported that after his martyrdom, the heavens were opened, revealing the bishop with his deacons "rising crowned up to heaven, with the stakes to which they had been bound still intact." The Roman consul, Aemilianus, was summoned to see this as well: "Come

¹¹From time to time in the Acts of the Martyrs, the martyr will remind the human judge that his authority is itself derived from God in whose hands alone all power exists. The judge is a servant of God, and for that reason how the judge disposes of his authority will become an issue at his own judgment in the last day.

¹²*Martyrdom of Apollonius* 14 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 95).

¹³*Martyrdom of Carpus* 10-12 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 23, 25).

and see how those whom you have condemned to death today have been restored to heaven and to their hopes." However we are told, "when Aemilianus came, he was not worthy to behold them."¹⁴

Gustav Wingren reminds us that in the New Testament the theme of imitating Christ in his suffering and death is connected with suffering under earthly masters. He refers to 1 Peter 2:21 and following, where the reviling of Christ before His judges is depicted as that which the Christian should be prepared to suffer in his body: "For to this have you been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps." Wingren relates this Petrine passage to Romans 13:4, which speaks of the civil authority as the instrument of God's wrath upon the evildoer. God uses human punishment as the instrument of His wrath.¹⁵

It is true that the theme of God's wrath is rarely evident in accounts of early Christian martyrdom, except for the occasional threat that the persecutor will receive God's wrath on the last day. Nonetheless, the fact remains that true Christian martyrdom is obedience to God's will that the martyr die, and that this will is executed through the instrument of the persecuting powers. The wrath and fatal power of the authorities are, therefore, the form in which the will of God is effected. Certainly in the acts of the martyrs, martyrdom is not regarded simply as a tyrannical evil which catches the martyr unawares and brings him unwillingly to judgment and death. Martyrdom is an expression of the divine intent, and only that martyrdom that is willed by God is regarded as a true martyrdom. This is, in fact, the central theme of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* which narrates the story of Polycarp's martyrdom in contrast to the story of a certain Quintus. Quintus, perhaps an early Montanist, had given himself up and had encouraged others also to give themselves up for martyrdom. However, when he saw the wild animals, Quintus "turned cowardly."¹⁶ Polycarp, however, had left the city of Smyrna at the first signs of persecution and had retired to the countryside. Shortly thereafter, Polycarp had a vision in which he saw his pillow consumed

¹⁴*Martyrdom of Fructuosus* 5 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 183). That the death of the martyr itself is a witness to the living God is the reason why the title of "martyr" was given only to the one who died for his confession. The title did not refer to the verbal testimony made before the magistrate; it referred solely to the death of the martyr.

¹⁵Wingren, *Creation and Law*, 54 and following; 79 and following.

¹⁶*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 4 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 5).

by fire, and he knew that he was to be burned alive.¹⁷ Because God wills the martyrdom of Polycarp, the narrative of Polycarp's martyrdom reports of his constant steadfastness in his confession, even to the extent that he refuses to be bound to the stake at which he was to be burned, since God will grant him to remain unflinching in the fire.¹⁸ What God wills, God sees to the end. The martyr who faithfully submits to his death, reveals the will of God that he submit to the death of martyrdom.

It is, therefore, the will of God that the martyr die. And by assenting to that will through submission to the judgment of the earthly authorities, the martyr's will to die becomes the expression of God's will that he die. In this way the obedience of the martyr to God's will that he die is the form of the martyr's rejection of false gods and, as such, is the obedience of faith in that God who, as creator, puts to death so that He might again create by making alive. It is in submission to his own martyrdom that the martyr witnesses to the real and proper relationship between God and man, namely, that it is God alone who gives life and man who receives it. In this faithful obedience and in this obedient faith the victory of Christ's resurrection over death is manifested. That the dominion of death is broken in the martyr is manifested in the fact that the judgment of death was not capable of deterring the martyr from going into martyrdom. By remaining steadfast in the confession of the true God, the martyr witnesses, therefore, to the victory of Christ's resurrection from the dead. That in the death of Christ, death was itself defeated, is shown in the martyr by his refusal to apostasize. The martyrological equivalent to the statement "in the cross Jesus conquered death" is the statement "in persecution and martyrdom the martyr proclaims and confesses Christ, even in his death." This is the theme especially of the *Letter of the Lyons Martyrs*, which tells us that the confession of the martyrs and their steadfastness in the midst of torture was nothing other than a demonstration that "the sufferings of the present age are not to be compared to the glory which shall be revealed to us."¹⁹ Although he was speaking of all men and not specifically concerning the martyr, Irenaeus,

¹⁷*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 5 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 5, 7).

¹⁸*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 13 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 13).

¹⁹*Letter of the Lyons Martyrs* (Eusebius, *History of the Church* 5.1.6; Musurillo, *Acts*, 63).

in his typically pithy fashion, puts the point like this: "being in subjection to God is continuance in immortality."²⁰

We must now, in conclusion, make explicit two points that have been implicit throughout the discussion. First of all, martyrdom is the right worship of a true sacrifice offered to God. As we have seen, martyrdom is the refusal to acknowledge false gods by sacrificing to them, and this by way not only of open confession, but by way of one's own death. However, the demand of the earthly authorities that a sacrifice be given is, in fact, paradoxically carried out. The martyr allows the authorities to slay him and so, in that way, to sacrifice him up to the true God. And as a death fully embraced by faith in the one true God, martyrdom is a sacrifice of self fully acceptable to God. Not surprisingly, early Christian martyrs are often discussed in sacrificial terms. Ignatius of Antioch speaks of his own martyrdom in such categories: "Then I shall be a true disciple of Jesus Christ, when the world no longer sees my body. Pray Christ on my behalf that through these instruments of God [namely the beasts] I might be found a sacrifice."²¹ In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the martyr-bishop is reported to have prayed a prayer almost certainly based on the eucharistic prayer of the church at Smyrna. In this prayer, Polycarp also speaks in terms of sacrifice: "May I be received this day among [the martyrs] before your face as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as you, the God of truth who cannot deceive, have prepared, revealed, and fulfilled beforehand. Therefore, I praise you, I bless you, and I glorify you above all things, through that eternal and celestial high priest, Jesus Christ, your beloved child, through whom is glory to you with him and the Holy Spirit now and for all ages to come. Amen."²² Martyrdom is an expression of that right worship of love toward the Lord God with all your soul, body, and mind. It is the worship of faith in that God who is the true God. In view of this, it is perhaps not surprising that the remains of martyrs early on were associated with altars and the dates of their martyrdoms became occasions for liturgical festivals. Likewise, the stories of martyrdom are replete with liturgical hymns and the language of praise. We may simply note as illustration the wholesale interweave of martyrological and liturgical themes in the Revelation of Saint John.

²⁰Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.38.3.

²¹Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Romans* 4.2.

²²*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 14.2-3 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 13, 15).

The second point to be made in conclusion concerns the confession, "I am a Christian." The report of this confession made before courts and magistrates is a constant feature of early Christian martyr stories. A good illustration of this is in the *Letter of the Lyons Martyrs*. We are told that Sanctus, a deacon from Vienne, would simply answer every question put to him with the words, "I am a Christian." Rather than state his name, his birthplace, his nationality or anything else, Sanctus would simply repeat this confession again and again, and "the pagan crowd heard not another word from him."²³ Clearly for Sanctus, his personal identity was not essentially determined by family, place, or ethnicity. His identity was determined by his relation to God, and this relation was signified by the confession, "I am a Christian." However, in martyr stories this confession is spoken in a particular context in which the naming of one's God is demanded, in which sacrifice to false gods is demanded, and in which steadfast faithfulness to that God who creates by making alive results in one's death. In this context, what it means to be a Christian is given a specific and definite content, and that content is this: to be a Christian means to reject the false pretense of the world's powers; to be a Christian means to confess the true God who has created all things and who makes anew by giving life to the dead through the resurrection of Jesus Christ; and to be a Christian means to remain steadfast in that confession and hope even unto death. "Be faithful unto death, and I shall give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10). It is in faithful martyrdom that we receive a clear answer to questions asked earlier: Who is the god who claims to be our God?; and how does one make this God to be one's own god? The answer, once more, is this: according to the theology of Christian martyrdom, the god who lays claim on our allegiance is none other than that God who wills our life and gives to us all that is necessary to sustain it; He is none other than that God who, because of our lack of faith in His will to make us alive, judges us with death; and He is none other than that God who, in judging us to death, is exercising His will to create anew from nothing by making the dead to live. And how does one make this God to be one's own god? According to the theology of Christian martyrdom, the answer is this: one makes God, the Creator, to be one's own god by dying to the world, so that one might live to Christ.

²³*Letter of the Lyons Martyrs* (Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 5.1.20; Musurillo, *Acts*, 69).

The fact is, this theology of martyrdom is pervasive in the New Testament, even when not explicitly speaking of martyrs. The death of the martyr is the visible and public expression of Christian death, and for that reason the martyr was regarded as a saint, that is, one in whom was made manifest the reality of Christ and His church. We conclude with but one example from the New Testament that incorporates many of the aspects of this theology which we have discussed:

Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the presence of God who gives life to all things and of Christ Jesus who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord, Jesus Christ. And this will be made manifest at the proper time by the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. (1 Timothy 6:12-16)