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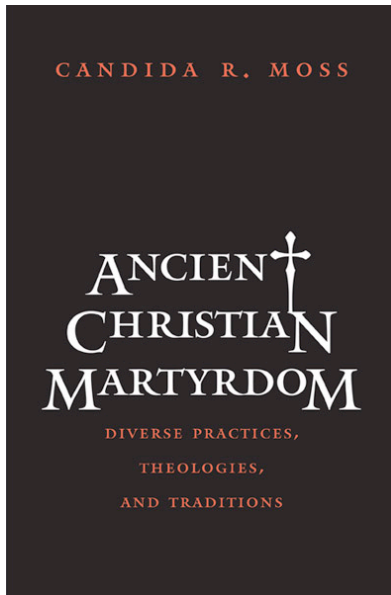
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Moss, Candida R.

Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. Pp. xiv + 256. Cloth. \$40.00. ISBN 9780300154658.

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The cross-cultural phenomenon of martyrdom is more than two thousand years old but, as contemporary events show time and again, still very much alive. Martyrdom is part of the foundation myth of Christianity. It appeals to the imagination of many because it is a highly ambiguous spectacle with thrilling deadly consequences. Currently the concept of martyrdom itself becomes more and more blurred, also because secular or religious martyrdom plays an important role in current social, political, and ethnic conflicts. Depending on whose side one chooses, martyrs become heroes or icons of the enemy. Points such as these may explain why there is an ongoing stream of studies about martyrdom—not in the least about the beginnings of martyrdom in the Christian tradition. What is new in Candida Moss's book about early Christian martyrdom during the first two centuries C.E.? First of all, it concerns a fresh and well-presented synthesis of existing scholarship on early Christian martyrdom. Second, the book has a geographical focus, which is new indeed: five regions are discussed together with the key documents that originated in those areas (Asia Minor, Rome, Gaul, North Africa, and Alexandria). A major purpose of this arrangement is to highlight the different articulations of martyrdom in those regions. Third, related to the second point, Moss aims at contextualizing the martyrdoms by linking them to related contemporary documents, social and cultural trends within the specific region, or local key figures from the period involved.

The introductory chapter lays out the set-up of the book. Chapter 2 indicates the importance of the strategy to read martyrdoms in the cultural context of their regional origin. The next five chapters all discuss martyrdom in one particular region. These chapters offer a broad perspective and include documents that deal only partly with martyrdom (e.g., apocryphal Acts of the Apostles) or appear to be relevant in other ways. Building on her own previous work, Moss argues that the old bishop Polycarp may have died a martyr's death sometime in the second century but that the Martyrdom that describes this death must date from the third century. The implication is that the Martyrdom of Polycarp "did not initiate the era of Christian martyrdom" (19). The use of the first-person and eyewitness vocabulary does not necessarily imply that the document is an eyewitness account penned shortly after Polycarp's death. The first-person narrator and the eyewitness vocabulary are strategic tools that validate otherwise unsubstantiated miracles. The sophisticated incorporation of many parallels from the Gospels that associate Polycarp's death with that of Jesus Christ also speaks against the authenticity of the Martyrdom. Nevertheless, Asia Minor is the first region discussed, which suggests that Christian martyrdom did originate in this region. This would mean that Ignatius of Antioch's seven letters are the key documents about the beginning of martyrdom in the Christian tradition, but this is actually far from certain. Moss knows about the complexities of the history of transmission of Ignatius's Letters, and the fact that several scholars argue that the articulation of martyrdom in these letters hardly matches an early date at the beginning of the second century. Nevertheless, she seems to leave the issue of the date open.

Moss's monograph offers a fresh perspective on early Christian martyrdom, and her critical attitude toward the issue of authenticity of some of the key documents should be appreciated. Her elaborate discussion of the Martyrdom of Polycarp is excellent, and her conclusion—based on a historical, literary, and conceptual analysis—that this martyrdom must originate from the third century is persuasive. As a matter of fact, I would have welcomed that she would have applied her rigorous critical approach toward the Martyrdom of Polycarp also to other martyrdoms, such as Ignatius's Letters and the Martyrdom of Pionius. There are close connections between the Martyrdom of Polycarp and the Martyrdom of Pionius (e.g., the focus on martyrological orthopraxy and the function of martyrs as models of the catholic church), which triggers the question what the implications of a third-century date of Polycarp's Martyrdom are for the Martyrdom of Pionius (date after 250 C.E.). Unfortunately, the latter martyrdom is hardly discussed by Moss because she deals only with the first two centuries.

As already indicated, Moss's regional approach focuses upon the differences among the early Christian martyrdoms. Her discussion of Rome highlights the philosophical martyr. Justin Martyr, not Paul, is the key figure here. Moss argues that Justin's conversion to

Christianity “was part of his philosophical quest for the vision of God” (81). In his *Apologies* Justin elaborates the practice of martyrdom in order to point out what it means to be a Christian, and he builds his argument on contemporary philosophical conventions and values. He also defines Christian identity by constructing the Jews as a counterpoint. He claims that only the Christians had martyrs and that the Jews were famous for rejecting and persecuting God’s messengers, including Jesus. The Acts of Justin and his Fellow-Martyrs also presents the martyrs as philosophers and implies, therefore, that Christianity was a harmless philosophy. Nevertheless, the martyrs’ main opponent, Governor Quintus Iunius Rusticus, instructor of the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius, did not fall for this type of philosophy. His values and ideals function as a contrast to the philosophy of the protagonists of the Christians, with *eusebeia* (the proper attitude toward the emperor/Jesus Christ) as a key word (at least in recension B).

This argument is appealing and even triggers the question whether the author of the Acts aims at depicting Justin beating the Stoic Rusticus, so to speak, “at his own game.” I wonder, however, whether the philosophical articulation of martyrdom is unique to the Roman region. As a matter of fact, the contemporaneous Jewish martyrdom 4 Maccabees shows important and intriguing analogies with the philosophical martyrdom connected with Justin, including conventional ideas such as “living in accordance with nature,” “living in line with reason,” and “appealing to justice.” *Eusebeia* is a key word in 4 Maccabees as well, although interpreted from a Jewish perspective. Scholars mostly argue that 4 Maccabees originates from Antioch, some plead for Asia Minor, but nobody, as far as I know, for Rome. So, how should we explain these analogies between the philosophical interpretation of martyrdom in Rome and that in 4 Maccabees, all the more so since Justin stereotypes the Jews as those who reject God’s messengers?

Moss interprets the North-African traditions of martyrdom from the perspective of apocalypticism—with a strong focus on the vindication of the martyr and heaven as the place for future judgment—and the appeal to Paul’s letters in support of certain community practices. Her discussion of martyrdom in Alexandria concentrates on the deconstruction of the idea that attitudes toward martyrdom can be delineated on doctrinal grounds and the ideal of true martyrdom. For one of the regions the approach of Moss works less well, as she herself acknowledges: the case of Gaul. The names of the martyrs described in the Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne imply that some of them were immigrants from Phrygia and others had Romano-Gallic connections. Nevertheless, the precise context in which this martyrdom originates remains largely unknown. A further complication is that it is unclear to what extent Eusebius, who transmits the letter, adapted the text. Moss argues that external evidence for a persecution of Christians in Gaul in the second century is missing and that the details about the martyrs’ arrest are improbable. The highly literary character of the martyrdom, with a

strong focus on the details of torture and the degradation of the martyrs' bodies, shows important correspondences with martyrdoms from other regions. The martyrs from Lyons and Vienne do not feel pain, similar to the Maccabean martyrs in 2 and 4 Maccabees, and in this way they triumph over their opponents, who are depicted as beasts and barbarians. The theme of Blandina's role as mother of a Christian family, perhaps a family of martyrs, reminds one of the striking change in the construction of Perpetua's family relations: in light of her upcoming martyrdom, Perpetua moves over from a Roman patriarchal family context to the alternative household of Christ, and she becomes a role model for other Christians. In short, it remains difficult to indicate what would be typical for the configuration of martyrdom in Gaul.

I warmly recommend this book to anyone interested in the topic of ancient martyrdom. Moss's regional approach offers new insights and rightly emphasizes the important differences between the early Christian constructions of martyrdom. By offering a grand but nuanced picture of Christian martyrdom in the first two centuries, it also stimulates one to analyze the correspondences and differences between early Christian and early Jewish martyrdom, which is referred to time and again. One question remains after reading this fascinating book: Would the picture change if the problematic history of transmission of some of the key documents and the important historical and textual problems connected with them—pointed out by Moss—leads to the conclusion that at least some writings in their current form, such as the Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne and the Passion of Perpetua, should be dated later than the usual dates assigned to them? Moss is fully aware of this complication, but drawing the consequences of a Decian or even post-Decian date of some of the key documents may call for another book.