

Martyrs (Christianity, Early Modern Period)

BY [RONALD G. ASCH](#)

VERSION 1.0 | PUBLISHED 17 FEBRUARY 2023

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1. Introduction

As witnesses of their faith, martyrs are central figures of the Christian tradition. While a martyr is at first an innocent victim who suffers death rather passively, martyrdom generally presupposes that the martyr deliberately sacrifices his or her life. That 'sacrificium', which is made following the example of Christ, inherently has heroic characteristics. However, depending on the context, one can focus on the [heroic act](#) of self-sacrifice and the heroic fortitude in death or – alternatively – on the suffering of [violence](#) and the innocence of the martyr. The confessional conflicts and divisions of the 16th century led to important new accentuations not least for the reason that now two different Christian concepts of [martyrdom](#) were competing with each other. Additionally, starting in the second half of the 17th century, a tendency to secularise the idea of martyrdom emerged. Men and women who had died in the fight for a political idea could now also be seen as martyrs.

2. Protestant martyrs in the 16th century

In the struggle for the loyalty of their own believers, but also in their attempts to convert members of rival confessional groups, all churches deployed an extensive arsenal of theological and rhetorical weapons including different media from the outset of the religious division. One of the most important weapons was the argument that a denomination's long list of martyrs vouched for the truth of its belief system, for the martyr's death was, after all, the sign of the true faith and the true church.

The *Acts and Monuments* by John Foxe (1517–1587) for instance, first appearing in print in 1563 and republished in several editions, described the persecution of Protestants under the Catholic monarch Mary I between 1553 and 1558. That wave of oppression had resulted in the deaths of around 300 men and women. Invoking those martyrs was intended as authentication of the Church of England's claim to be a true church and also served as a warning against another possible attempt by Catholics to seize power in England, possibly with Spanish assistance.[1] The martyrs whom Foxe glorified were invoked primarily by those Protestants in England who deemed a conflict with Rome and Spain as part of a wider apocalyptic battle inevitable. Therefore, in order for the gospel to prevail, they considered it necessary for believers to have the unqualified heroic determination to fight wholeheartedly against both the papal antichrist and the global Spanish monarchy.[2] Furthermore, in the Netherlands and in France, the identity of the Reformed churches was shaped especially by their members' experience of being persecuted. The memory of the persecutions long defined Protestants' self-understanding in those countries and could certainly be reactivated in situations where the aim was to portray a compromise with foreign or domestic Catholics as a path that would inevitably lead to ruin.[3]

However, Protestantism lacked the tradition of venerating saints. Moreover, the visual and theatrical (re)presentation of suffering physical agony in all its gruesome details was not cultivated in Protestantism to the same extent as in Catholicism, even though Foxe's work for instance was illustrated with numerous woodcarvings that depicted executions. Still, there was no real equivalent to the Mannerist or Early Baroque religious art of Catholicism that was designed to overwhelm viewers with shrewdly calculated precision. Additionally, there was the sense that it was difficult to portray Protestants as martyrs who had died in battle, such as the Protestant soldiers of the French Wars of Religion, or others who had themselves perpetrated acts of violence; to Protestants, the classic martyr was after all primarily a victim and not a perpetrator. Furthermore, in France at any rate, the Protestants, who constituted only a minority in a predominantly Catholic country, began portraying themselves in the 1570s as heroic fighters and – if they were members of the nobility – as advocates of traditional noble virtues, and less as martyrs of their faith. The nobleman who fell fighting bravely on the battlefield also wished to receive a certain level of recognition from moderate Catholics; the Protestant martyr, on the other hand, did not.[4]

3. The martyrs of the Catholic reform and Counter-Reformation

But the Catholic notion of what a martyr was also underwent a transformation when the Medieval church broke apart. In the second half of the 16th century, Catholics were subject to direct violent persecution from the state primarily in England and (to a slightly lesser degree if the mere number of those executed for their faith were considered) in Ireland. In England from the 1580s onward, Catholic priests who celebrated the Mass in England or just dared to enter the kingdom were automatically treated as traitors and punished accordingly for high treason. Several dozen clerics were executed – in many cases after they had previously been tortured – in gruesome fashion (the condemned was initially hanged, then while still alive cut from the gallows, disembowelled and quartered). On the Continent, numerous hagiographical writings were soon printed and circulated that celebrated these victims of the Elizabethan persecution as witnesses of their faith, even though the court proceedings against the priests tried to refute the impression that the Catholics were condemned because of their faith. In legal terms, the focus was instead on the rebellion against the secular authority of the

monarch. Although the intent was not to create any martyrs, the trials and executions managed to do so in the end.

On the Continent, not just texts, but also woodcarvings and other visual representations of the executions of Catholics called on their audiences to be aware of the danger of further persecution where Protestants were in power.[5] Besides the priests, Mary Stuart, whom Elizabeth I had executed in 1587 after a great deal of hesitation, also achieved great prominence as a Catholic martyr – in fact the Scots queen had deliberately staged her death as an act of martyrdom. Furthermore, the dissemination in France of martyrological works and pamphlets on the death of the queen and the English priests contributed substantially to the significant re-escalation of the French Wars of Religion during their final phase. It was that intensification that forced King Henry III to flee Paris in 1588 and ultimately culminated in his murder by the monk Jacques Clément the following year.[6]

Beyond the direct political impact of the Catholic veneration of martyrs in the context of confessional conflicts and tensions, at the turn of the 17th century, Catholicism in general saw an enthusiastic immersion in martyrdom, even an enthusiasm for the agonies of martyrs' deaths. Specifically, the Jesuit dramas of the era celebrated the gruesome deaths of Catholic martyrs, depicting them in all their details.[7] Scholars have described this as a 'heroic turn' not just in theological discourse but in the actual faith of believers and their lived religious experience.[8] An important factor in this respect was the attempt by Catholics to use the history of the early Church, which the Protestants were frequently invoking in their criticism of the papacy, for their benefit and to knock one of the Protestants' most important weapons out of their hand. Focusing less on the Acts of the Apostles and the model of church organisation that they appeared to provide, and more on the early Christian martyrs, Catholicism and its cult of the saints appeared to preserve the memory of that early period of Christianity better than Protestantism. In the end, "the proselytisation and the martyrdom of the early Christians were equated with the conversion of Protestants within the community of Christianity".[9]

However, when it came to the suffering of contemporary martyrs, it was often the victims of the persecution of Christians in Japan (beginning in ca. 1597) who were particularly prominent and became the subject of numerous Jesuit stage plays.[10] Martyrdom was used by Catholics virtually as a weapon, not just on the stage, in pamphlets and in printed imagery, but also in real life, considering for instance the willingness of Catholic priests in England to die for their faith.[11] The sight of heroic fortitude in enduring suffering was intended to convince their confessional rivals to convert. Accordingly, a martyr's death itself was a heroic deed, and hagiologies were not seldom combined with narratives of miracles that God had performed in order to show who the recipients of His mercy really were: the Catholics.[12]

Furthermore, there were also religious assassins among the Catholic Church's own ranks who died in action while killing a heretical despot or were executed subsequently. They too were celebrated as martyrs and victims in a holy war, though not canonised. That was true for Henry III's murderer, Jacques Clément, just as much for William the Silent's assassin, a fanatic Catholic who killed the Father of the Netherlands in 1584 by firing two pistols into his chest.[13] The innocent, rather passive victim was ultimately turned into a heroic perpetrator.

4. The internalisation and sublimation of religious martyrdom in the 17th century

In the course of adjusting to the need to find a compromise with the confessional opponent after all, be it at a European, inter-state level or within one's own country, as was the case in France between 1598 and 1685, the martyr ideal was modified. The memory of the victims undermined any compromise between the confessional camps. In order for any peace that was achieved to actually endure, that memory needed to be disarmed to a certain extent, be it that martyrs who had an all too strong connection to the present were forgotten, possibly under the instruction of secular or ecclesiastical authorities[14], or that their meaning for the present was redefined. In this sense, the martyr's active suffering as the victim of the religious rival could even be replaced with the ascetic's penance. In any case, that was true in Catholicism. However, there were also certain parallels among militant Protestants. Specifically, an internalisation of confessional militancy can be seen in France after 1598. The conditions for that were considerably more favourable after the death of Henry IV (1610) than directly after the end of the Wars of Religion, for the situation had stabilised to a certain extent after all. The religious energies that had fuelled the hate for the confessional opponent before 1598 were now internalised and spiritualised to a greater degree. The heroic religious fervour that had manifested itself in the active and violent fight against the Protestants was replaced by more peaceful ideals of piety, as they were championed by the *dévots* after 1598. For them, inner and outer peace had priority. They also rejected armed conflict against the Huguenots because it endangered social peace.[15] The fact that none of the martyrs of the Catholic League were beatified or declared to be saints by the Curia after 1600 was significant in itself.[16] Under the auspices of the Tridentine reform, the traditional ideal of sainthood was transformed. The focus was no longer so much on publicly bearing witness to the true faith that possibly led to martyrdom, but, as Robert Descimon has emphasised, on the internalisation of a religious feeling of particular intensity.[17]

Thus the criteria for sainthood were changed at the start of the 17th century when canonisations recommenced after a brief hiatus (no one had been made a saint between 1528 and 1588). The "heroic virtue" of the candidates was now central.[18] Despite its popularity in contemporary art and religious drama, martyrdom became less important, except in the case of martyrs who had died for the Church either long ago or outside of Europe, for instance in Japan. It was precisely those Catholics who had died in the fight against the Protestants during the French Wars of Religion who could be remembered at best very cautiously and in a subdued way.[19]

After 1600, the heroic fight against the Huguenots and other heretics was replaced to a good extent by inner crusades against one's own passions and body, not just in the sense of a strict asceticism, but also in the sense of a struggle for grace in mystic contemplation. The saint was no longer characterised as strongly as before by his – or her – miraculous deeds or his death as a witness of the faith, but by his mystic visions.[20] In this context, mystic piety could certainly be associated with the notion of heroic suffering, be it suffering from one's love of God, or perhaps even a suffering in the constant struggle against demons.[21]

In addition, specifically for women, serving the sick and poor also became a point of emphasis that could take on qualities of a heroic self-sacrifice. For France, arguably, one can even say that religious devotion became feminised after the Wars of Religion ended. Female role models became more important in any case, like Madame Acarie (Barbe Acarie, monastic name: Marie de l'Incarnation,

1566–1618), the widow of one of the leaders of the Catholic League in Paris who joined a Carmelite monastery in 1614. Furthermore, in the later movement emanating from Port Royal des Champs, a convent near Paris reformed by its abbess Angélique Arnauld (1591–1661) starting in ca. 1610, with its new ideals of piety, the abbesses and nuns of that community, who consciously devoted themselves to a heroic ideal of sainthood, played a decisive role.[22]

In the process of that internalisation and spiritualisation of a heroic religious struggle, the suffering of potential saints was also re-evaluated. As Antoinette Gimaret has shown, the depictions of physical suffering recede in the hagiographies of the early 17th century. In its political struggle, the Catholic League had still used the “corps spectacle”, as Gimaret calls it, as one of its arguments. The mysticism of suffering and confessional militancy were closely associated with each other during the Wars of Religion.[23] That link now gradually dissipated: the pious body could now no longer suffer publicly because that would have disturbed the peace between the king’s subjects and in particular the peace between the confessional churches. Suffering was thus relegated to the intimate or private sphere, but it acquired an all the more important status as a symbol of piety or even of sainthood.[24]

The heroic virtue that was now officially also the decisive criterion for the kind of sainthood recognised by the Church was evident most notably in an act of enduring suffering, and the suffering attested that virtue. One can even say that a gradual shift from mysticism to moralism occurred in the religious rhetoric on suffering.[25] This development may to a certain degree be a specific French one, but in light of the significant role that France played for 17th century Reform Catholicism, it cannot be underestimated. There certainly were parallels in Protestantism, but ones that served different intentions. For Reformed Protestantism, which in many places first acquired a clear confessional profile in the conditions that the persecutions had created, the fact that the persecutions were now a thing of the past and that there was no longer any immediate threat could be seen as problematic. The religious was at risk of becoming profane or routine, a development that threatened the claim to belong to a chosen minority. This problem was particularly evident in England, where the established church was characterised by a strong tendency to compromise that left many theological and ecclesiological questions unanswered. Patrick Collinson and Alexandra Walsham have argued that in order for militant Protestantism to survive in England, it had to create an environment of martyrdom even at times when there was no immediate threat of persecution. Radical Protestants distinguished themselves from the masses of supposedly or actually indifferent believers, and thereby became the target of considerable resentment, which was directed primarily against their pretension of moral superiority. The animosity that they encountered in turn allowed them to portray themselves as victims and martyrs for their convictions and to derive from that a specific heroic consciousness that they were the chosen ones.[26] Braced by their memory of the persecutions during the time of Mary I, they could present themselves as the successors of past martyrs if they were compelled to conform to liturgical or other church rules that they rejected.[27] Much of that may have been caused by the exceptional situation which the constitution of the Church of England created. But we do also see a certain association between deliberate self-exclusion, the feeling of being persecuted, or at least the threat of it, and the claim to belong to a religious elite on the Continent, for example among the members of the Reformed Church in France or in the Holy Roman Empire.

5. The political martyr

Even Charles I, who was executed in January 1649 after his defeat in the second English civil war, was at least just as much the martyr of a political group (the defeated Royalists) as he was the martyr of a religious faith. Although the hagiographical literature that appeared immediately after his death as well as his self-justification, which was published in 1649 under the title *Eikon Basilike*, emphasised that he had died to defend the Church of England and its hierarchic, episcopal constitution against sectarians and fanatics, it was nevertheless clear that he had at least just as much been the victim of a primarily political conflict. That did not prevent his followers from dedicating a number of altars to him posthumously in Anglican churches or from making him the patron saint of churches. Nevertheless, his execution was consistent with the classic example of the death of a religious martyr only to a very limited extent.[28] That was also true for the regicides who were apprehended and executed after the monarchy was restored in 1660. Additionally, while some of the regicides had in fact believed that they were fighting in a holy war, their deaths were reinterpreted from the late 17th century onwards and even more radically in the 18th century. Attempts were made to turn a man like Sir Henry Vane the Younger (1613–1662), who had interpreted the history of his time and, quite unequivocally, even his own death at the gallows in an entirely eschatological perspective, into a primarily political freedom fighter. However, that approach never really panned out as long as the memory of the historical Henry Vane had not entirely disappeared. The Whigs of the early 18th century may still have been ardent opponents of Catholicism and papal supremacy, but they were often at a loss when it came to the theological issues with which the protagonists of the 17th century 'Puritan Revolution' had been preoccupied.[29]

Notably, the memory of both the Whig martyrs of the 1680s (see below) and of the heroes of the Good Old Cause from the time of the civil war and the English republic was also purged of elements that emphasised the confessional passions of the predecessors of modern Whiggism all too much. Where that was not possible because the men in question had been guided in their lives and their political efforts too clearly by confessional principles, these heroes were ultimately forgotten or de-heroized. That is what happened with Sir Henry Vane gradually in the 18th century, whose eschatological visions could no longer be communicated, even though initial attempts were made to include him in the canon of republican heroes of liberty. It was not until the 19th century that he became a hero of liberty and of the fight for a libertarian constitution and progress in America (in his youth, he had been the governor of Massachusetts).

In 1683, the so-called Rye House Plot was discovered and three leading Whigs, Lord William Russell, Algernon Sidney and Arthur Capell, Earl of Essex, were executed or, in the case of Capell, forced to commit suicide for allegedly conspiring against the king. They were already seen primarily as political martyrs at the time of their deaths, and not as witnesses of their faith, as Sir Henry Vane still was in 1662 to an extent.[30] Still, Sidney's political stance specifically was also rooted in a militant Protestantism that could hardly be distinguished from his Republicanism.[31] These more religious elements of the self-understanding of the martyrs of 1683, however, were increasingly glossed over in the following decades. A central role in this process was played by the philosopher, deist and Whig John Toland (1670–1722). After the Glorious Revolution, Toland successfully presented the republican heroes of the Good Old Cause who had died before 1688 in a new guise that resembled ancient

republicanism far more than the strict Calvinism or even the religious enthusiasm of the late 16th and early 17th centuries.

Thus the heroes of the Good Old Cause became in the end – in the 19th century, and not without violent ruptures – predecessors of modern liberalism.[32]

The martyrs of 1683 were also not least of all rebellious aristocrats. Their successors in the late 18th century, specifically during the French Revolution, were not. Nevertheless, as heroes of liberty who no longer had any religious connotation, they constituted the prototype for later martyrs of freedom, or at least for the portrayal of political victims of violence in the guise of such martyrdom.[33]

6. References

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- 4 El-Kenz, David: "Les usages subversifs du martyr dans la France des troubles de religion. De la parole au geste". In: Lestringant, Frank (Ed.): Martyrs et martyrologes. Lille 2003: Université Charles-de-Gaulle, 33-51, 40-41. This and hereafter follow Asch, Ronald G.: Herbst des Helden. Modelle des Heroischen und Heroische Lebensentwürfe in England und Frankreich von den Religionskriegen bis zum Zeitalter der Aufklärung. Ein Essay. Würzburg 2016: Ergon, 27-44, 70-80, and 95-105. Significant portions of this article are based on that monograph.
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- Asch, Ronald G.: *Sacral Kingship between Disenchantment and Re-Enchantment: The French and English Monarchies, 1587–1688*. New York 2014: Berghahn, 21.
- 7 Burschel, Peter: *Sterben und Unsterblichkeit. Zur Kultur des Martyriums in der Frühen Neuzeit*. Munich 2004: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 255-280, especially 274, which observes that the “great period of stage martyrdom” did not begin until the turn of the 17th century and concludes: “If determining the length of the potential phases of this heroic boom, it must be noted that the two decades before the war [before 1618, RGA] served primarily the purpose of armament – both quantitatively and qualitatively – and the three decades of warfare served the purpose of intensification.” (Translation by Daniel Hefflebower.)
 - 8 Burschel: *Sterben und Unsterblichkeit*, 2004, 263–264; cf. regarding the Catholic notion of what a martyr was Gregory, Brad S.: *Salvation at Stake. Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge, Massachusetts 1999: Harvard University Press.
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 - 12 Gregory: “Salvation”, 1999, 283; Burschel: *Sterben und Unsterblichkeit*, 2004, 281-282; Janssen, Geert H.: *The Dutch Revolt and Catholic Exile in Reformation Europe*. Cambridge 2014: Cambridge University Press, 108.
 - 13 Gregory: “Salvation”, 1999, 295.
 - 14 Descimon, Robert / Ruiz Ibáñez, José J.: *Les Ligueurs de l'exil. Le refuge Catholique Français après 1594 (Époques)*. Seyssel 2005: Champ Vallon, 22, with reference to the fact that the Catholic martyrs of the Wars of Religion were not canonised.
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Bernardo J. (Ed.): *El Arte de la Prudencia: La Tregua de los Doce Años en la Europa de los Pacificadores*. Madrid 2012: Fundación Carlos de Amberes, 345-364.

- 16 However, between 1588 and 1767 (no canonisations took place between 1767 and 1807), only 2 of the 56 individuals canonised were martyrs anyway, namely John of Nepomuk and Fidelis of Sigmaringen, and only the latter was actually killed by Protestants (in Grisons) in 1622, and even he was not canonised until 1749 (but he was beatified in 1729). See Burschel: *Sterben und Unsterblichkeit*, 2004, 247-248; martyrdom is nevertheless an exceptionally influential “model of a Catholic completion to one’s life” (ibid., 252).
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In: Albion 27.3 (1995), 373-396.

Citation

Ronald G. Asch: Martyrs (Christianity, Early Modern Period). In: Compendium heroicum, ed. by Ronald G. Asch, Achim Aurnhammer, Georg Feitscher, Anna Schreurs-Morét, and Ralf von den Hoff, published by Sonderforschungsbereich 948, University of Freiburg, Freiburg 2023-02-17. DOI: 10.6094/heroicum/mchempe1.0.20230217

Meta data

DOI	10.6094/heroicum/mchempe1.0.20230217
Licence	Creative Commons BY-ND 4.0
Category	Hero Types
Subject Headings (LOC)	Early modern, 1500-1700 , Christian martyrs , Christian sects , Christianity , Counter-Reformation , Reformation , Sacrifice , Self-sacrifice
Index	<p>Authors: Ronald G. Asch</p> <p>Persons and Figures: Jesus, John Foxe, Mary I of England, Elizabeth I, Henry III (France), Jacques Clement, William the Silent (William of Orange), Henry IV (France), Barbe Acarie, Angélique Arnauld, Antoinette Gimaret, Charles I of England, Henry Vane, William Russell, Algernon Sidney, Arthur Capell, 1st Earl of Essex, John Toland, Mary, Queen of Scots</p> <p>Spaces and Locations: France, Rome, Great Britain, USA, Europe, Spain, Netherlands, England, Ireland, Japan, Port Royal des Champs</p> <p>Time and Events: 16th century, 17th century, 18th century, 19th century, Early Modern Period, French Wars of Religion (1562–1598), English Civil War (1642–1649), Reformation, Counter-Reformation, French Revolution</p>

Compendium heroicum

Das Online-Lexikon des
Sonderforschungsbereichs 948
„Helden – Heroisierung – Heroismen“
an der Albert-Ludwig-Universität Freiburg

In Kooperation mit dem Open Encyclopedia
System der Freien Universität Berlin
www.open-encyclopedia-system.org

Gefördert von der Deutschen
Forschungsgemeinschaft

Kontakt

Sonderforschungsbereich 948
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Albert-Ludwig-Universität Freiburg
Hebelstraße 25
D-79104 Freiburg im Breisgau

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