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Early Christian Martyrdom and the End of the Ur-Arché

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Abstract

This essay follows the assumption that the first principle of classical metaphysics has its counterpart in political sovereignty as suprema potestas. Therefore, both can be equally described as arché. Their epitome is the God of so-called ontotheology, who thus proves to be what I call the Ur-Arché. In contrast to current post-metaphysical approaches, however, I suggest overcoming ontotheology through a different metaphysics, which emphasizes the self-transcending surplus character of being. I regard early Christian martyrdom as an eminent way in which the surplus of being is manifested. This has two interwoven aspects, one ontological and one political, both arising from the excessive idea of the Christ event, or the notion that there is life beyond life unto death. I will analyse the mechanism allowing early Christian martyrs to counteract Roman imperial sovereignty. Finally, I will relate this to contemporary life systems in which sovereignty has become anonymous biopower.

Keywords

sovereignty – martyrdom – early Christian martyrdom – Ur-Arché – political ontology

There is an intrinsic relationship between sovereignty and unconditionality. One may think here primarily of Jean Bodin's seminal theory of absolutism,[1] yet, the relationship between sovereignty and unconditionality applies to all types of political systems, including democratic ones. It has existed as long

1 Jean Bodin, *On Sovereignty. Four Chapters from The Sixth Book of the Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

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as there has been domination. Put in structural terms, as soon as sovereignty exists in actu and is exercised, even if distributed among a plurality of actors, it is irreducible. That is, it is one undivided power. As Giorgio Agamben showed in his *Homo Sacer* project, Occidental theory has explicitly addressed this since its very beginnings. Sovereignty thus proves to be the arché par excellence, and as such, the last residuum of classical metaphysics. Wherever there is sovereignty, there is arché, that is, a supreme principle on which depends what and how things are.

In recent post-metaphysical years there has been no lack of attempts to restrain sovereignty by tackling its unconditional character. Especially Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida come to mind here. Yet both (as well as other post-metaphysical attempts) can be accused of not having really broken the bond between sovereignty and unconditionality. Thus, in the case of Habermas, sovereignty may be tied to the communicative process of all citizens, if possible, and the politico-administrative system of the state is obliged to follow it. Yet, even if Habermas' model of separation of powers applies, sovereignty continues to be one and unconditioned as soon as it is exercised, that is, whenever it is in actu. In some cases, such as the forced expulsion of migrants, it will even demonstrate this with all severity. There is no need for speculation here. The reality of the democratic constitutional state, which Habermas' discourse theory ideally reflects, shows it all too clearly.

By contrast, to conceive of a "coming democracy", Derrida proposes to separate unconditionality from sovereignty. The unconditioned thus appears to be the Other's non-anticipable claim for justice, which makes any presumed sovereignty collapse. Yet it seems as if behind our disempowered backs the Other, the unconditioned, is again merging with sovereignty. For Derrida connects human openness for the Other to the coercive instrument par excellence, namely death; a connection that – we will get back to this later – also applies to sovereignty. As Derrida writes in *The Gift of Death*, "only death or rather the apprehension of death can give … irreplaceability, and it is only on the basis of it that one can speak of a responsible subject",[2] that is, a subject open to the Other. Certainly, there is a shift in perspective here. Sovereignty threatens to give death, while the Other demands to take death upon oneself. Yet, the gesture is similarly authoritarian. It appeals to a thoroughly finite life, ultimately subject to death.

Like many post-metaphysical approaches, this essay too aims at overcoming the classical metaphysical arché, in other words, it aims for a life beyond

2 Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 51.

sovereignty, given that sovereignty – and this notion is undoubtedly negative and must find justification – is the single force of submission and domination, rather than of autonomous, yet shared unfolding. In contrast to authors such as Habermas or Derrida, however, in this essay, the way there leads through a transformed metaphysics, a metaphysics that can be called a dynamic metaphysics. According to it, the ground of being is to be conceived as a constant surplus movement that is both constitutive for what exists, or the existent, as well as it points the existent beyond itself, bestowing it with an inner transcendence.

The notion of a dynamic grounding driving the existent beyond its own finite form also implies another notion of the unconditioned. For in fact, all relevant attributes of unconditionality can be assigned to the surplus movement of being. It is irreducible, self-generating, unrestricted. From this perspective, Derrida is right when he states that the unconditioned and sovereignty must be separated. Only that unconditionality detached from sovereignty does not refer the existent to death, but rather to life in so far as life is always already beyond its finite form, that is, life unto death.

Christian martyrdom is to be understood as a pronounced indication of this dynamic metaphysics. It therefore introduces a practice, more precisely, a form of life, that makes it possible to systematically overcome sovereignty. This is so because by orienting itself on the Christ event, that is, on the death of the alleged human God-King and the resurrection of the Living One, it reveals a life beyond life unto death. That is, it reveals a life irreducible and unconditioned, a radically free life. The question is to what extent the postmodern present can connect to such a life without necessarily being Christian in a confessional sense.

1 Ways of Martyrdom

To get to the dynamic-metaphysical aspect of early Christian martyrdom, it is necessary to first look at the "unconditioned politics" of martyrdom in general. To clarify the terms, early Christian martyrdom refers to the persecutions Christians endured up until the Constantinian shift at the beginning 4th century, taking place everywhere in the Roman Empire, especially in Asia Minor and North Africa. As Emmanuel Carrère notes, "all 'good' [Roman] emperors [were] anti-Semitic and anti-Christian".[3] Christians were also victims of lynch law.

3 Emmanuel Carrère, *The Kingdom. A Novel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux: Penguin, 2014), p. 321.

Much more often, however, they were officially killed by the Roman state. Especially "good emperors" like Trajan, Hadrian or later Decius tried to stabilize the invading Empire by reviving traditional Roman religion, which at that time included the imperial cult. Thus, the killing of Christians who refused to sacrifice any "graven image" was also supposed to serve as a sign of the Empire's unaltered firmness.

Martyrdom in general refers to a self-sacrifice leading to death for the sake of a supra-individual concern that is placed above one's own interest in life. Martyrdom is therefore not simply about suffering violence as, for example, in the case of violent crime. Rather, it is about suffering "for something", for a certain cause.

Self-sacrifice is a possibility inherent in human being. Nevertheless, it is not by chance that the term martyrdom originated in Christianity. Christianity initiated an explicit discourse on self-sacrifice, thus turning it into a political and counter-political action in its own right.

Apart from Christianity (even if the term derives from it), one may distinguish different forms of martyrdom, religious forms (also apart from the three monotheisms) as well as secular forms (the ancient noble death, especially the so-called philosopher's death; or, more recently, the declared martyrs of socialism in so-called real socialism). There is martyrdom passively endured in which the martyrs decisively refrain from exercising any violence themselves; and there is aggressive martyrdom in which the martyrs, in addition to their own death, accept the death of others (for example, the Islamic martyr on the battlefield (shahid al-ma'araka), the Christian crusader, and also terrorists of different persuasions). Finally, there are border phenomena such as self-immolation or other forms of protest suicide, which are strikingly common at present.[4]

Early Christian martyrdom, at least considered at its core, or regarding its ultimate perspective, differs from these forms of martyrdom in the way it deals with sovereignty. It abolishes it. To clarify this point, it is advisable to stay with the general perspective for a while. In principle, martyrdom has to do with a conflict of unconditional claims about what the world should be like. The cause for which the martyr dies, refers to another order of things counteracting the existing order in which and by virtue of which she suffers death. Certainly, this is a confrontation in the extreme, which goes beyond reason and its communicative achievements.

4 In a study carried out between 2003 and 2010, the cultural sociologist Lorenz Graitl lists 298 cases worldwide. Lorenz Graitl, *Sterben als Spektakel. Zur kommunikativen Dimension des politisch motivierten Suizids* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2012), pp. 60–61.

A "dark" theory of power may be instructive here, borrowing from Hobbes and authors inspired by him such as Canetti, Strauss and most recently Esposito.[5] There is an intrinsic connection between sovereignty and death. Nothing makes people as susceptible to manipulation and control as todesangst, the anxiety about death, which can take on many and often mediated forms. It is as present in the primitive search for food as in the attempt to please others so as not to fall out from the social fabric. At its core, it refers to the fundamental and ever-present situation of existential nakedness in which one finds oneself without any support, weak and alone, and exposed to an impenetrable darkness that will swallow "me", the precious I. As Heidegger (and Derrida) noticed, it is primarily the awareness of death and not the logical operation of the Cartesian Cogito that leads to the Ego, its distinctiveness and irreplaceability. Sovereignty is essentially established by appealing to this primal scene of mortal anxiety, evoking it in one way or another. That is, in one way or another, sovereignty exploits the neediness of life, its lack, its loneliness, its urge to escape from the gullet of death. Life unto death alone, however, will find no means to oppose this, since it touches on the conditions of this life itself.

Martyrdom proves to be a radical disempowerment or – to speak with Walter Benjamin – a depositioning (Entsetzung)[6] of the existing sovereignty. By willingly accepting to die for her cause, the martyr abolishes sovereignty's ultimate instrument of power, that is, the threat of death. A profound reversal is taking place. Suffering violence becomes the medium of emancipation. For in martyrdom, death turns into the sign of the martyr's cause, which thus proves to be superior to the existing sovereignty. One may summarize the logic of the martyr as follows: You, the existing sovereignty, may kill me, yet in fact, you cannot touch me. The cause for which you kill me and for which I die is stronger than the death, on which your power is based, and by dying, I am demonstrating exactly that. My extinction destroys you, because it deprives you of your very foundation.

As a rule, of which Christianity in its most distinguished form is the exception, the cause of martyrdom turns into counter-sovereignty.[7] Whether it is a religion, a political conviction or even the vague idea of a dignified life, martyr-

5 See Roberto Esposito, *Communitas. The Origin and Destiny of Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 20–24.

6 Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1996), p. 251. Note that the English translation renders "Entsetzung" not quite accurately with "suspension."

7 See James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1990); Sigrid Weigel, 'Schauplätze, Figuren und Umformungen. Zur Kontinuität

dom endows them all with concrete power. Correspondingly, the cause of martyrdom may link itself with images of a reality in accordance with this cause, images that the individual martyr can usually fall back on. Yet in exchange, through her martyrdom she gives these images real weight. Paradoxical as it may sound, given its sombre character, yet every martyrdom produces hope and determination. It strengthens those who oppose the existing order, even those who are isolated and lost. Therefore, every martyrdom can release or intensify real action. It has a specific power to set the bodies in motion. It may lead to conquering the streets and public spaces, to occupying public buildings. It initiates a counter-movement against ever-solidifying authority.

Christianity was hardly ever in harmony with its ultimate possibility. Therefore, also Christianity knows strong images of counter-sovereignty. The Book of Revelation is a prime example. Introducing a first theology of martyrdom, it situates Christian suffering in a final end-time battle. The last prospect is the disaster coming over the persecutors, which is evoked in an endless array of horror images – and the salvation coming over the persecuted, materializing in images of an almost delirious fantasy of power, which is linked to the idea of a first resurrection of the saints of God, the martyrs, in the Millennium.[8]

The symbolic vendetta of the Book of Revelation, somewhat removed from the language of the Gospels, may be disturbing or even repulsive, on the one hand. On the other, it is presumably difficult for any human being to endure persecution and resistance without the idea of a future reward. Perhaps this is only possible if one is prepared to fully accept life as it is here and now, that is, to live according to the surplus movement of life, even if at the brink of death.

2 The Christ Event as Excessive Idea

At the core of early Christian martyrdom lies what opens the way towards this, and in union with it, the way towards the depositioning of sovereignty without replacing it with counter-sovereignty. This is so because early Christian martyrdom follows, or is the following of, what one may call excessive idea, namely the Christ event, that is, the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, who is both God and man. The term event here refers to something that occurs suddenly and cannot be causally derived, that is, it is irreducible. The term excessive idea indicates an idea that, first, at least to some extent, can be assimilated

und Unterscheidung von Märtyrerkulturen', in Sigrid Weigel, ed, *Märtyrerporträts. Von Opfertod, Blutzeugen und heiligen Kriegern* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2007), pp. 11–40.

8 Rev. 20:4. All Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.

into the common world of experience, that is, it is not completely incomprehensible. However, second, it points beyond the common world, so that there is a remainder incommensurable for understanding.[9] Finally, the excessive idea can orient action precisely because it creates a tension between the ordinary and the incommensurable. In this respect, it is related to the symbolic, which is also concrete and pointing beyond the concrete at the same time, thus producing what one may call determined indeterminacy, or a space of possibilities that charge life with surplus meaning.

The excessive idea of Christianity reads as follows: God became man. As man incarnate God died on the cross. On the third day after his burial God-man rose again from the dead.

One can make sense of these sentences, at least in fragments, especially when thinking of processes of transformation. Jesus himself used the parable of the wheat grain falling into the ground (Jn 12:24). Nevertheless, each of these sentences remains radically inconceivable. They bring together what seems infinitely distant, namely on the one hand, God who withdraws from any intuition, even intellectual intuition, and on the other, what is empirically most concrete, present in constant self-affection, that is, man as flesh (σάρξ).

However, the unintelligibility of the Christ event cannot come as a surprise. Rather, it is a crucial characteristic of the excessive idea that conceptual schemata must miss it, or that an abstract analysis cannot account for it. This exactly makes it excessive. Nevertheless, it proves significant or even profound – a truth beyond all that one could know by purely conceptual means – when it is related to the actual practice of human life. Life itself renders evident and meaningful what previously, and from an abstract perspective, seemed meaningless.

In what follows, the relationship of the excessive Christian idea to human practice is to be developed in two steps. First, the Christ event is to be read as the nucleus of a political ontology. This reading is due, on the one hand, to the intelligible, transformative aspect of the Christ event and, on the other, to the fact that it has already found an interpretation through the history of Christian martyrdom. Second, the investigation will turn to early Christian martyrdom and examine how it relates itself to the Christ event, manifesting it as a truth that goes beyond life as it seems to be at first, including limited, finite under-

9 In a stimulating interpretation of Kant's aesthetics, John Sallis speaks of the excessive character of Kant's aesthetic idea that "exceeds every concept". I agree with the following definition: "The excessive idea stretches the concept beyond what it comprehends, expanding it beyond itself." John Sallis, *Transfigurements. On the True Sense of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 65.

standing. One can call this the performative dimension of the Christ event, while the first aspect has to do with its theoretical dimension. It is important to understand, however, that in the Christ event, as in every excessive idea, both dimensions are inseparably intertwined.

For a political-ontological interpretation the two sides of the Christ event, that is, both the death and the resurrection of Christ, must be related to each other. This is important not least because in recent similar political-ontological attempts, there is a tendency to emphasize only one side of the Christ event. Slavoj Žižek, for example, focusses mainly on the death and abandonment of Christ on the cross.[10] By contrast, Alain Badiou puts all weight on the "resurrection-event."[11] Both approaches thus ignore the actual challenge of the Christ event, which leaves it unsolvable by abstract, conceptual means, yet, it frees to the freedom of angstless, non-subjugated life. This is what one may call the over-dying of death, or more simply, the idea of life overcoming death.

Two powers of death are present in the Christ event and are finally overthrown, namely secular or mundane sovereignty on the one hand, and divine or theocratic sovereignty on the other. The name Pontius Pilate stands for mundane sovereignty. Pilate represents Roman imperial power. It will impose death on Jesus – just as it will impose death on countless Christian martyrs in the three hundred years to come. Through the death of Jesus, it is in principle overcome, even if it de facto continues to work, based on the spectral foundation of human todesangst.[12]

The superior sovereignty, however, the sovereignty par excellence or the Ur-Arché,[13] is theocratic sovereignty. Certainly, God who dies on the cross is not the

10 As a prime example (among many others), one may think of Žižek's discussion with John Milbank in John Milbank, Slavoj Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009).

11 Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). An explicit critique of Badiou by Žižek can be found in John Milbank, Slavoj Žižek, and Creston Davis, *Paul's New Moment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), pp. 74–99.

12 May it suffice to say that this essay disagrees with Agamben's idea that Jesus went through a "trial without judgment" and that "judgment and salvation remain up to the end unrelated and incommunicable". Giorgio Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), pp. 47–49 resp. p. 54. To the contrary, Christ's work of redemption, the revelation of life beyond sovereignty, has essentially to do with the fact that he died through imperial law. Yet, even if this had not been the case, the later martyrs reiterated the death of Jesus as if it had been the case. They died in lawsuits brought against them by imperial power, and in doing so, they confirmed the excessive Christian idea.

13 The term Ur-Arché is already used by Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty when they are speaking of the Earth as an Ur-Arché. As can be easily seen, however, this essay

Father, but the Son. Yet the Son is the one who, as the Anointed One, could have manifested the sovereignty of God on earth. He is the king of the Jews as Pilate had put it upon the cross – as mockery, but also as ignorant prediction that the sovereign, every sovereign, will perish in the wake of the death of this ridiculous man Jesus. In the Christ event, the Son as potential theocratic Messiah is abandoned by God, or rather – Žižek is right on this point – he is God abandoning Godself; God insofar as God is the sovereign God, God as suprema potestas, Lord of that law whose "commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death" (Rom. 7:10). The logic of the law refers to human beings as fallen ("sinful") and accordingly subject to something supreme. It addresses them as a life marked by death, open to domination, or even, in need of domination.[14]

What would happen if the Christ event had ended with God abandoning Godself, as Žižek and also Agamben[15] argue? This would be the end of the one and unconditioned sovereignty, that is, the absolute arché. In other words, it would abolish the classical metaphysical foundation of domination. However, even if the Ur-Arché, that is, God as the epitome of suprema potestas on which a whole logic of hierarchization depends, had been removed, the actual instrument of power, that is, death remains. The Ur-Arché may therefore have vanished, yet, this is not the end of domination. Rather, in a finite world left to death alone, sovereignty is now infinitely scattered. It is everywhere. It has been transferred to everything and everyone. That is, everything and everyone, all processes and relationships, is now saturated with power. This also means that everything and everyone is at the same time object and subject, or agent, of sovereignty. If God abandons Godself, sovereignty is groundless, yet, it is total.

Admittedly, the perspective of the self-abandoning of God and consequently the totalization of sovereignty is a possibility the Christ event provides. In fact,

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uses the term somewhat differently. On Husserl and Merleau-Ponty see Rajiv Kaushik, *Art, Language and Figure in Merleau-Ponty: Excursions in Hyper-Dialectic* (London et al.: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 41–43.

14 This discussion of the law is delicate, because the law to which St Paul refers is the Halakha. Certainly, this essay does not intend to revive any kind of Christian anti-Judaism. Rather, it seeks to transfer the biblical texts to a level where they may work as thought figures. Thus, the law St Paul refers to, and which is abolished through the Christ event is the ideal-typical union of sovereignty and unconditionality. A discussion on this level would have to ask whether the Halakha could also be understood as a form of free life. As point of reference, one may think of Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption*.

15 As Agamben writes in *The Time That Remains*: "He who upholds himself in the messianic vocation … knows that in messianic time the saved world coincides with the world that is irretrievably lost. … The saving God is the God who abandons him" after having abandoned Godself. Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains. A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 42.

modernity took up this very possibility. It was above all Nietzsche who drew the appropriate conclusions from this, and thus it can be said that the world of God abandoning Godself is the world of Nietzsche (and later in a congenial way of Foucault), that is, a world dominated by unlimited Will to Power, based on nothing but ultimate nothingness. And the world of Nietzsche is also the world of the postmodern present, dominated by mortal anxiety, cast therefore under a spell of senseless productivity. As Bataille understood, the only possible liberation in this world, given that it is the only possible world, is "dépense improductive", that is, unproductive expenditure or waste – waste that goes as far as self-sacrifice, the martyrdom of a hopeless counter sovereignty.[16]

There is more to the Christ event, however. There is not only abandonment. Rather, God reveals Godself in the life and death of the human Jesus as life that is always already beyond death. What is, therefore, first abandonment proves to be grace in the end and after a radical turn-around. Death is followed by resurrection. The Christ event indicates that "Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over him, … the life that he lives, he lives to God" (Rom. 6:9–10). That is, death does not lead *ad inferos*, or to the realm of death, in which sovereignty is ubiquitous. Rather, death, suffered once and for all, reveals life, which is eternal and directed towards God (ζῇ τῷ Θεῷ). What is more, the liberation to life beyond death does not only affect the man Jesus. Rather, through his resurrection, it potentially extends to all people: "through one man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life" (Rom. 5:18). This is so, because through the resurrection of Jesus, God revealed Godself as the truly living God. The Logos who became man proclaims: "I am the resurrection and the life" (Jn 11:25), that is, the life flowing through every human being, or even the entire cosmos, and the resurrection that is intrinsic to this life and that keeps it alive beyond its worldly form, which is life unto death.

It is precisely here that the Christ event is significant for a dynamic metaphysics. With the overcoming of death by Jesus, the Messiah, who refused all the kingdoms of the world, the inner surplus of the existent becomes apparent. Just as death cannot fully grasp life and bring it to an end, so no finite form,

16 See also Agamben's insightful note on Bataille's "sovereign and useless form of negativity" in *Homo Sacer*. However, one may doubt whether Agamben's notion of "inoperativeness … as a generic mode of potentiality that is not exhausted … in a transitus de potentia ad actum" is an option either. Rather, it seems like a dream of eternal hibernation, dictated by both fear of death and fear of life. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 62.

including the conceptual framework of the finite mind, can grasp the existent. The existent is always beyond what it is, and it owes its very existence to this movement beyond itself. It emerges from it. It could not be what it is without this gravitating towards its own surplus.

Metaphysically speaking, one may therefore say that the existent is grounded. However, it is not grounded in something, even if this was the most real (*ens summum*, *ens originarium*, *ens entium*). Rather it is grounded in movement, or more precisely, in surplus movement. In the course of this movement the existent is constantly arriving in itself, that is, it is generating itself as a specific and specifiable something. And yet this movement is never completed, that is, the existent will always be more than it is in the course of its genesis as something. Yet again, this does not mean that the constitutive surplus movement of the existent runs into nothing. Rather, it is heading towards the absolute, incommensurable core of the existent, or towards the absolute arrival of the existent beyond itself. This precisely – this movement towards an absolute, excessive vanishing point – is the unconditioned, out of which the existent exists.

The excessive metaphysics of the Christ event has a practical and political dimension. If the resurrection of Jesus justifies the life of all by revealing that life is beyond death, this also means that everyone is free or beyond sovereignty: "you have been called to liberty" (Gal. 5:13). The guiding principle of life is no longer Law – any law, or any (determining) form of domination –, which addresses the existent, insofar as it is finite. Rather, what directs life is life itself in so far as life surpasses itself towards unconditioned surplus. Now there is freedom from death, now there is freedom from Law, now there is the call to eternal life: "the kingdom of God is in your midst" (Lk. 17:21) – this is of both ontological and political significance, and it leads to the performative aspect of the Christ event.

3 Martyrdom as a Form of Life

As noted, the Christ event is an excessive idea and therefore incommensurable to the mind. As in the case of any excessive idea, however, it is possible to follow the Christ event and to realize it in human life. When this happens, the incommensurability of life itself reveals itself. The excessive idea of the Christ event thus proves to be true, yet not by thinking alone, but in the dialectic of thinking and living – living according to the vision that came over thinking. The surplus of being is more real than thinking, and thinking can only cope with it when it entrusts itself to life.

This essay will discuss towards the end which practices today may correspond to the notion of life beyond life unto death. Primarily, however, the Christ event realizes itself in the martyrdom of Jesus. Again, that means that due to the excessive nature of the Christ event, the martyrdom of Jesus is only effective if it is followed by further martyrdom.

A decisive achievement of the early Christian communities was that they succeeded in iterating the martyrdom of Jesus by making it their own form of life. Here one can note a crucial difference between Christian martyrdom and previous types of martyrdom such as ancient noble death or Jewish martyrdom, for example, of the Maccabees (even if both types were important reference points for the emerging Christian theology of martyrdom).[17] While the previous types are bound to specific situations, Christian martyrdom is a way of life. In fact, a fact often forgotten by ecclesio-bourgeoise "Christendom" (Kierkegaard), it is the very Christian way of life, life in the following of Christ, that is, life dying and rising again with Christ; de facto, however, from a temporal perspective, life in constant readiness for death. The freedom of Christian life beyond sovereignty is precisely related to Christian life having the form of martyrdom.

One may regard the persecutions of the early Christians as evidence that the imperial environment somehow perceived, yet not understood, their extraworldly character. Significantly, the most general charge brought against them was hatred of the human race (odium humani generis) – as if humanity were identical to those subject to imperial domination.[18] As so often the case, however, the extreme intensification of circumstances permits to get to the heart of the matter. That is, persecution allowed the early Christians to develop martyrdom as a life form.

In fact, the establishing Roman Catholic Church owed its existence to this process.[19] It is controversial whether martyrdom could impress outsiders so much that they sought proximity to Christianity. Contemporary martyr liter-

17 See Theofried Baumeister, *Genese und Entfaltung der altkirchlichen Theologie des Martyriums* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1991).

18 Paul Middleton, *Martyrdom. A Guide for the Perplexed* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2011); Detlef Liebs, *Das Recht der Römer und die Christen* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2015).

19 As did, in the long run, later not explicitly Christian movements of nonviolent resistance that could draw on Christian martyrdom to develop their own life form of martyrdom. As a prime example, one may think of Mahatma Gandhi's concept of *Satyagraha*, which describes a decidedly nonviolent way to insist on the truth. Gandhi never denied its proximity to Christianity. Thus, as P.A. Raju writes, he "interpreted the passive resistance of the early Christians as *Satyagraha*. Jesus … in terms of Gandhi was an indomitable *Satyagrahi* where love and truth merge on one point". Poosapati Appale Raju, *Gandhi and His Religion* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2000), p. 110.

ature, the so-called martyr acts, claims this several times, while authors of the Roman intelligentsia such as Tacitus or Pliny recognize the Christian readiness to die, but generally reject it as the result of superstition.[20] There can be no doubt, however, that martyrdom strengthened Christian groups internally. The graves of the martyrs and the venerations dedicated to them were anchor points around which the early congregations organized themselves. As Erik Peterson, the great theological opponent of Carl Schmitt, notes: "Die Kirche ist auf dem Fundamente der Märtyrer erbaut. – The Church is built on the foundation of the martyrs."[21] Except for John the Apostle, St Martin of Tours is the first Christian saint to die a natural death, and it is not by chance that this was in 397, when the Roman Church had become Imperial Church.

The performative dimension of early Christian martyrdom manifests itself through three scripts that can be distinguished in the martyr acts and the concurrent *Exhortationes ad martyrium* (exhortations to martyrdom), a peculiar genre between edification and political propaganda to which a number of prominent authors such as Augustine, Origen or Tertullian contributed. These scripts are mediating instances that enable the excessive idea of the Christ event to be realized in life. One may also speak of role models. Through the common life of the communities, especially Script reading and preaching, they are integrated into the lives of the individual believers. Thus, the parishioners not only "put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27), but equally the martyrs, they adopted the life form of martyrdom.[22] This included the prospect of their own death for Christ. Sometimes they may have even desired self-sacrifice. There is a model for this, too. In his *Letter to the Romans* from the early 2nd century, Ignatius of Antioch begs the Roman community not to take any action to prevent his martyrdom.

There are three scripts, a mimetic script (that is, the script of imitatio Christi), a juridical script, and finally an agonistic script.

The script of the imitatio of Christ is directly connected to the ontological aspect of the Christ event and thus to the overcoming of the Ur-Arché. Accord-

20 See Jakob Engberg, 'Martyrdom and Persecution – Pagan Perspectives on the Persecution and Execution of Christians c. 110–210 AD', in Jakob Engberg et al., eds, *Contextualising Early Christian Martyrdom* (Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang, 2011), pp. 93–117.

21 Erik Peterson, 'Zeuge der Wahrheit', in Erik Peterson, *Theologische Traktate, Volume 1* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1994), p. 95 (own translation).

22 See Eusebius, *Church History*, IV, 15, 42: "For we worship him who is the Son of God, but the martyrs, as disciples and imitators of the Lord, we love as they deserve on account of their matchless affection for their own king and teacher. May we also be made partakers and fellow-disciples with them."

ingly, the focus is on the martyr as another Christ (alter Christus).[23] As such he or she participates in the mystical body of Christ. This is the Church as the community of those who, by following Jesus, are living beyond sovereignty.[24]

The martyr acts demonstrate the union of the martyrs with Christ in different ways. For example, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, one of the most prominent martyr acts, obviously follows the structure of the Passion narrative.[25] Thus, Polycarp literally takes upon himself the Passion of Christ and repeats it in his own body. Felicitas, who is the protagonist of another prominent martyrdom, the *Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas*, explicitly formulates the identity or fusion with Christ: "What I am suffering now [that is, in prison, where she gives birth to a child shortly before being executed, S.L.], I suffer by myself. But then [in the arena, S.L.] another will be inside me who will suffer for me, just as I shall be suffering for him."[26]

By contrast, the juridical script focuses on the trial situation. It concerns the confrontation with mundane sovereignty. Up until the 16th century it was believed that the martyr acts were authentic trial records. Without relying on a historical-critical method, this is not even unreasonable, given that many martyr acts reproduce the actual structure of the trials in a rather stereotypical manner. They describe how the Christian defendants are first arrested and then brought before the imperial court, where they are asked to sacrifice to the Roman suprema potestas, either the state gods or the divinized emperor. However, the defendants refuse, thereby speaking the confessional formula: "I am a Christian". Apologetic conversation with the judges or other representatives of the state may follow. Finally, there is the execution.

Especially when compared to later Christian iconography, the execution scenes of the martyr acts are remarkably restrained. There is no drastic exhibition of suffering. To the contrary, the executions have something triumphant about them. Thus, and perhaps most expressive, the physical condition of the martyrs may miraculously change.[27] While being burnt at the stake, for

23 See Candida R. Moss, *The Other Christs. Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

24 This may remain uncommented on here.

25 Many studies have pointed this out. See for example, Michael W. Holmes, 'The Martyrdom of Polycarp and the New Testament Passion Narratives', in Andrew F. Gregory and Christopher M. Tuckett, eds, *Trajectories through the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 407–432, Candida R. Moss, *Other Christs*, pp. 56–59.

26 'The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas', in Herbert Musurillo, ed, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 123.

27 This may include gender-bending. See for example, Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and*

example, the body of St Polycarp, which "is not as burning flesh but rather as bread being baked" (possibly an allusion to the host), emits "such a delightful fragrance as though it were smoking incense or some other costly perfume."[28] The body of St Pionius (*The Martyrdom of Pionius*), who is also burned, undergoes an even stronger transformation: "after the fire had been extinguished, those of us who were present saw his body like that of an athlete in full array at the height of his power. His ears were not distorted; his hair lay in order on the surface of his head; and his beard was full as though with the first blossom of hair. His face shone once again."[29] Not only in this case the juridical script closes with images of victory and redeemed life.

The agonistic script is mainly present in the exhortationes. There is an apocalyptic tendency here and thus a tendency to establish counter-sovereignty. Often the agonistic script addresses the martyrs as partisans of the conflict between the pagan order, in fact, the order of Satan, and the Christian order of salvation. The role model is that of the fighter or, more frequently (as in the *Martyrdom of Pionius*), the athlete who wins the contest by sacrificing his or her life. The image of the athlete has a certain tradition in Christianity. Already St Paul, in 1 Cor. 9:24–27, refers to the runner and the fist-fighter as metaphors of spiritual life. Again, Tertullian's *Address to the Martyrs* (*Ad martyras*) refers to the model of the gladiator, which de facto comes closest to the public execution of the martyrs in the arena. Later Christian iconography adopts the agonistic script by depicting the martyrs with a palm branch or a crown, which allude both to the Passion of Christ and to the champion of a fairly serious competition.

4 Life Beyond Life Unto Death

The three scripts do not only illustrate the imaginary of the early martyrs. They also demonstrate that for us, the citizens of the supposedly free West, martyrdom is both close and distant in a strange way. One might imagine the possibility of applying the three scripts to oneself, even that of the spiritual warrior. However, there is something fantastic about it. Just as the idea of dying for a cause seems more or less remote. "More or less" because, on the other hand,

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Memory: Early Christian Culture Making (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), Anders Klostergaard Petersen, 'Gender-bending in Early Jewish and Christian Martyr Texts', in *Contextualising Early Christian Martyrdom*, pp. 225–256.

28 *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, p. 15.

29 *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, p. 165.

the possibility cannot be completely ruled out. It is a possibility belonging to human life, just like that other form of readiness for death, its darker counterpart, suicide.

This brings us to one last characteristic of early Christian martyrdom. It will also prepare the discussion on what it can mean today, and what perspectives it might offer.

It is a peculiarity of the performative economy of martyrdom in general that it presupposes not only the readiness for death of the martyrs, but also the readiness of the sovereign authorities to take their lives. The Canon law of the Roman Catholic Church takes this into account by stating that true martyrdom requires physical death motivated by hatred of the faith (odium fidei) on the part of the killer, the "tyrant".[30] Regarding early Christian martyrdom, it actually seems decisive that imperial Rome imposed death on the martyrs, which was carried out as public spectacle. Imagine the Christian defendants had only been sentenced to minor fines. Certainly, their testimony would not have unfolded with the same force, and Christian communities might have remained small and sectarian. Instead, by celebrating the execution of the Christian enemies of the state in public, Roman imperial sovereignty not only demonstrated its power over life and death. Rather it made itself vulnerable. It provoked a counter-reaction that challenged its unconditional claim to power in an equally unconditional way.

The reluctance of liberal states to openly exhibit their power therefore proves to be of political advantage. Power becomes a matter of anonymous processes and structures. It becomes less tangible. Terrorist groups (from Left-wing militants during the 1970s to current Islamist movements) may hope to provoke state violence to produce their own martyrs. Yet, by using violence on their part, they delegitimize themselves, and their political radiance remains low.

The point here is not to develop strategies against the liberal state. Rather, the question is more fundamental: How can there be life beyond sovereignty when it can no longer have the form of martyrdom? For to repeat, at least in the administered world of the West (to use Adorno's still valid phrase), sovereignty has changed. It no longer brings about death in direct confrontation. It does not even explicitly refer to death. There is no need for that because sovereignty, domination, has become ubiquitous – just as death has become ubiquitous, the omnipresent driving-force of life.

30 See Anna L. Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion. Progressive Catholicism in El Salvador's Civil War* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 93.

One may recall that Christianity faced a similar problem after the status of the Church had changed under Constantine. The ascetic tradition of the so-called desert fathers and mothers was one great attempt to preserve the life form of martyrdom at a time when the confrontation with secular power had come to an end. After all, the Christian ascetics were also ready to die. They fought for the mortification of a misguided desire. Therefore, the metaphors continue. Contemporary literature addresses the ascetics, like the martyrs before, as athletes or fighters.[31] Yet at that time common sense, or the cultural system, left no doubt that death was in the hands of God or at least a divinely authorized ruler.

As a glance at recent world politics will easily reveal, however, even in postmodern times, there are situations of martyrdom. Sovereignty, including power over life and death, then openly concentrates on certain actors, and public self-sacrifice continues to be a way of resistance or even initiating a change of existing conditions. On the other hand, a precarious labour market, for example, apparently excludes martyrdom. Doubtlessly, it destroys countless lives. Yet, what possibility could there be to ostentatiously take the market's destructive forces upon oneself and emerge victorious? There is only indifference on the part of the neoliberal sovereign, and that is not surprising given that it consists largely of regulations and procedures. It is no one.

There may be some way out of this, but it is not straightforward. It leads through a profound change of perspective, namely to create new forms of life out of the dynamic-metaphysical core of early Christian martyrdom that life is beyond life unto death. This notion is not specifically religious, even if it is about transcendence and about images and acts of transcendence. One may therefore think of corresponding forms of life, which would not be specifically religious either. They would orient themselves on the surplus movement of life. That is, like martyrdom, they work against death. Yet, unlike martyrdom, they do not demand to take death upon oneself, but rather the surplus of life.

This requires a human creatio continua answering the self-transcending dynamics of being, its specific being-beyond-itself. The guiding principles are well known. Attentiveness, awareness, respect, responsibility, preservation, conservation or promotion come to mind; growth, which is qualitative and not quantitative, unfolding each thing in its own way. Even more decisive, however, is the relationship to death underlying this movement. Ultimately, it would speak of a radical calmness towards death. It would create evidence

31 According to Roman Catholic regulations, however, the mortification of asceticism is martyrdom, yet, improper martyrdom.

of the innermost immortality of all things, including supposedly dead matter; of their ongoing transcendence over any definite form or state, even that of nothingness. By corresponding to things exceeding themselves, human creatio continua could finally be unreserved and free itself, a movement of pure devotion without submission.

By disintegrating the Ur-Arché, postmodernity has made it clear that sovereignty has only secondarily to do with specific instances of power, but first and foremost with death. As important as this was, it would be fatal to leave it at that. To transform and de-subjugate the existent, it is necessary to go against the driving force of the present cultural system, which is mortal anxiety. It is time to reveal what is hidden in the excessive idea of life beyond life unto death.

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