

Finally, there is the theological question. The Bible Society, which grew out of the movement, distributed 8.5 million Bibles in 157 languages by 1834 and 181 million by its centenary in 1904. These were people who loved and honored God’s Word, but some of the values they got from it, though essential to them, seem to us to be antiquated, culture conditioned and foreign—in a word, not biblical or binding at all. The question of the theology, perhaps we should say the faith, of Clapham, if it is referred to in many places, is not described in any detail, and the relation between that faith, coming out of the earlier revivals and life, and the subsequent history of the Victorian era, remains something of a mystery. “Amazing grace” led to a multitude of works and was the powerhouse behind them, but how those works became incarnate practically in sinful society seems to have been more of a pragmatic operation than a result of theological consequence. Put another way, On what biblical and theological basis did the Clapham group oppose slavery? It would appear that they had no place for John Calvin’s third use of the law or integrated theology of the Christian life. The territory of social reflection was increasingly occupied by the enemies of Clapham: Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*, to be followed later by Karl Marx and his disciples. It remains the default position of social visionaries to this day.

This book is valuable as a way into the achievements of the Clapham group. It raises many questions that have become more pressing ten years later and offers an invitation to another and more definitive work on the subject. Is it too much to hope that such a work will not be written from the perspective of social constructivism?

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Christian C. Sahner. *Christian Martyrs under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.

This finely researched and written book began as a doctoral dissertation at Princeton University. Christian Sahner is associate professor of Islamic history at the University of Oxford and a fellow of Saint Cross College. His work is a boon to anyone interested in the interplay between Christians and Muslims as Islam expanded west in the seventh to the ninth centuries of the present era (ca. 660–860). It provides a description of the world in which

the Christian martyrs (called “neomartyrs” by their contemporaries) lived and answers the question as to how the early medieval Middle East, northern Africa, and eventually Andalusia, progressively mutated from being a majority Christian territory into a majority Muslim society.

The book is not a general history but focuses on the role of largely unknown Christian martyrs and also how violence was a factor in the expansion of Islamic power. The known Christian martyrs during the period examined number less than three hundred (3), including a great number in Spain (forty-eight in Cordoba between 850–59), whereas Muslim martyrdom was nonexistent. On the Christian side, in contrast with Jewish or Zoroastrian victims of violence, Sahner indicates that martyrdom was a specifically Christian idea and practice. There was almost a predetermined script for persecution and martyrdom, established by the first Christian martyrs and the fact that all but one of Christ’s apostles died a martyr’s death. And its supreme example was from “the most profound inspiration from the figure of Jesus himself, who preached a message of finding strength through weakness and achieving victory through defeat” (1, 4, 7).

The use of capital punishment against Christians was an important feature of this history but was limited in scope (5). Rather than being the result of constant hostility and systematic persecution under the early caliphs, martyrdom existed against the backdrop of a common shared life as a means of establishing borders between the two communities. It served to maintain Muslim supremacy in a situation of minority power over against the conquered Christian majority. The Umayyad and Abbasid authorities persecuted and killed Christians to keep them in place since Islam could not afford challenges to its legitimacy. So bloodshed and martyrdom were rather the exception and served specific goals. Sahner argues that Christians did not experience systematic persecution under the early caliphs and remained the largest portion of the population in the greater Middle East for centuries after the Arab conquest. He calls the martyrs “outliers” (78), using a neologism I thought existed primarily in the realm of statistics.

The extraordinary episodes of oppression are a factor that contributed to the spread of Islam. But rather than the sword, it was heavy taxation and harassment by the Muslim authorities, as well as obstacles to trading, that made Christians turn to Islam “faster than sheep rushing to water.” Given these considerations, the fact remains that Muslim expansionism was by conquest, leaving a trail of bloodshed and slavery in its wake. Memories of bloodshed and martyrdom forged the Christian conscience of what it means to be a minority identity in the new Islamic empire. Perhaps it could also be said that Muslim identity was also forged by the spirit of conquest

and oppression, and the expression of this attitude has remained ingrained and known resurgence at various times in the history of Islam. Memory laid the foundations for subsequent antagonistic relations in centuries to come.

The martyrs came from all over. One of the great things about this book is that we get to know the moving stories of those who have been completely forgotten but who paid the ultimate price for their belief. Sahner introduces little-known martyrs executed by Muslim officials in far-flung places such as Syria and Spain, Egypt, and Armenia. They include an alleged descendant of Muhammad who converted, functionaries of the Muslim state or traders who unwisely insulted the Prophet, the children of mixed marriages, and many Christian monks. The story is one of how isolated individuals or small groups rejected Islam in dramatic acts of resistance, including apostasy and blasphemy.

The book has five major chapters, in which the following themes are examined consecutively: “1. Converting to Islam and returning to Christianity; 2. Converting from Islam to Christianity; 3. Blaspheming against Islam; 4. The trials and execution of Christian martyrs; and 5. Creating saints and communities.” Two indices follow, one a comparison of Christian and Muslim accounts of the martyrdoms and the second a helpful glossary of names and keywords. In order to tackle the subject the author examines the original sources in the martyr narratives in a range of Middle Eastern languages. Contrary to some recent scholars, such as Candida Moss, Sahner accords a good deal of credence to the literary form of the martyr stories and resists the temptation to consider them as simple hagiographic fabrications (8–22).

Two main issues are present in the stories which end in martyrdom. Firstly, conversion from Islam to Christianity—either by those who had been Christian before their conversion to Islam and more rarely the conversion of those of Muslim origin—and secondly, blasphemy. The general rule at play concerning conversion is that “although it may have been easy to join the Muslim community, over time, it became exceptionally hard to leave it” (35). Sahner points out that contrary to the complex initiation rites for conversion to Christianity, the threshold for entering the Muslim *umma* was low. Often it entailed the mass conversion of Arab tribes or people groups. It was a straightforward procedure (and remains so today) involving the recitation of the double *shahada*, or Muslim confession of faith, one of the five pillars of Islam: “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Messenger.” If apostasy is hardly condoned in the Qur’an, at the same time there is no provision for the execution of apostates. Early on there were examples of Muslims who apostatized but were not killed, including the

Prophet's Companion 'Ubaydallah b. Jahsh, who converted to Christianity never to return. Later however, after the Ridda Wars (632–33), apostasy became inadmissible. The *hadith* narrated by the Companion Ibn 'Abbas (688), "Kill anyone who changes his religion!" gained weight (36).¹

Blasphemy seems to have been an extension of apostasy, the act of pouring scorn on the Messenger and his sacred status by negating the *shahada*. It arose in some cases by misadventure out of inattention and in others by intentional provocation. Efforts were made in the trials of apostates and blasphemers to persuade the perpetrators and encourage return. Offenders were sentenced only as a last resort. Umayyad and Abbasid officials were cautiously clement and followed procedure before the sentence, but refusal and condemnation culminated in "decisiveness and fury," including torture. The so-called *hiraba* (brigandage) verse of the Qur'an (Q. *al-Ma'ida* 5.33) states, "The recompense of those who wage war against God and His messenger and strive to spread corruption in the land is that they be killed or crucified or have their hands and feet cut off on alternate sides, or they shall be expelled from the land. That shall be their degradation in this world, and in the hereafter, they shall have a terrible torment" (170–71). If the burning of heretics is nowhere present in the Qur'an and was contested by Muslim jurists, it was probably adopted on Roman and Byzantine precedent (176–91). Burning served to demonstrate who held power in Islamic society and also prevented there being relics to feed the cult martyrs.

The final chapter recounts how in martyrologies the apostates of one community became the icons of the other. Their lives are presented as models to honor and emulate, so encouraging others to abandon Islam, and illustrating the injustices of the enemy. The aim was to present resistance to the powerful by openly disparaging the foundations of Islam and the Prophet himself. Several of the martyr stories originated in a small number of monasteries and represented the no-compromise position of the martyrs who were themselves often monks or nuns (213).

This first book-length study of Christian martyrdom in the early Islamic period is completed by a fifty-page bibliography and index. It raises important questions that remain in the mind of the engaged reader. Sahner states in the preface that his intention is not to compare religious violence in the early Islamic era and the present situation, and that should such

¹ Sahner does not reference Christine Schirrmacher, "*Let There Be No Compulsion in Religion*" (Sura 2:256): *Apostasy from Islam as Judged by Contemporary Islamic Theologians: Discourses on Apostasy, Religious Freedom and Human Rights* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), which primarily concerns the modern era, but probably appeared too late for inclusion; see *Unio cum Christo* 3.2 (October 2017): 252–56.

considerations be legitimate, it is a work best left to another writer. A concluding chapter on the issues linking the past to the present would certainly have been difficult to write, but without it the book remains suspended in the past. Martyrs there were then, and martyrs there are now, as history sadly repeats itself. That now as then these martyrs are almost exclusively Christian cannot but raise suggestions in the readers' minds. Perhaps the most prominent of these concerns how the witness of the founders of each faith is formative for their followers since they were the supreme exemplars.

Furthermore, if, as the author states when discussing conversion, scholars tend to overlook what kind of Islam converts were embracing and what kind of Christianity they were leaving, and if it is necessary to recall that "Islam" and "Christianity" "meant something very different than they do today" (33), the tantalizing question remains as to the nature of those differences. It is hard to overlook that whereas Christianity in the West has gone through the transformations of Humanism and the Enlightenment, the same is not the case for Islam. In both cases this fact must impact the nature of mission and the winning of converts. Does Islam recognize that there should be "no compulsion in religion," as Christianity has done because of the break with caesaropapism and the rise of the notion of freedom of conscience following the Reformation? Is it still difficult to exit Islam, and what does that say about it as a religion? And if in post-Christian Europe it is becoming rapidly difficult to dissent from social agendas and express one's opinion without compulsion, what does that say about the "progress" of Western society? This indicates the difficulty of holding together conviction and liberty or certainty and tolerance in any society.

Finally, what does this book say about ourselves as its modern readers? It is a paradoxical experience to be sitting comfortably with a finely produced volume about martyrdom and to measure the difference between our comfortable lives and the gory sufferings of martyrs who seeded the church—rather like sitting in a plush, air-conditioned cinema watching people slipping down the deck of the Titanic to their doom. We can be relieved not to be there, but does it not ultimately raise the uncomfortable question as to the nature of faith and the outcome of our lives? Have the creature comforts we consider essential to our quality of life effectively weakened our perception of the grace of God?

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