Martyn and Martyrs: Questions for Mission

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The life of Henry Martyn raises important questions about martyrdom in the Christian church. In the New Testament *martyria* does not mean simply "being killed for faith" - though it does mean that. Broadly it means "bearing witness" to all that God has done in the life and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and to all that God has done in the church and in our lives. But in the course of history, it has come to bear a particular meaning in relation to bearing persecution in the name of Jesus Christ and of being willing to lose one's life for his sake.

**Martyn's Attitude, Experiences, and Actions**

Born in 1781 in the relative obscurity of Truro, Cornwall, Martyn emerged in 1797 at St. John's College, Cambridge. Rather lost at first, he gradually found his feet, mastered his subjects, and ended up as senior wrangler in mathematics. At the same time he came to commitment to the Christian faith, with all sorts of questions arising in his mind about his vocation. He went on to be elected a fellow of St. John's College, he was also a curate at Holy Trinity Church with Charles Simeon, and he had charge of a village church in Lolworth, near Cambridge. If we are going to think of Martyn as a martyr, we need to begin first of all with what was going on in his life, beginning with key attitudes he developed during his years at Cambridge.

**Attitudes.** Martyn resolutely determined to give up the things that young men might regard as their right to have. For example, he chose to give up wealth and the chance of making money. He was willing to give up the "comfort of married life," an expression that he himself uses. And he was willing to give up the possibility of a glittering academic and clerical career. Here was an attitude of mind that is most important in our understanding of him.

**Experiences.** Martyn’s experiences were equally important, things that he did not determine himself but that he had to undergo. First of all was the loss of his family fortune. Nearly all that the family had was lost, and Martyn, after the death of his father, became responsible for the care of his younger siblings. This was a responsibility that he took very seriously and that prevented him from being a missionary with the Church Missionary Society because CMS did not pay enough and Martyn needed the money for family responsibilities.
That was one reason why he accepted a chaplaincy with the East India Company. So the loss of the family fortune played a great part in the direction that Martyn took.

There was also the loss of family members. Both he and others of his brothers and sisters had inherited from his mother what was called "a delicate constitution," and many of his siblings died even before him; he himself, of course, died very early, at the age of thirty-one. So there was the loss of his family, particularly of his younger sister, which was quite crucial in determining his mind-set.

Then there was the refusal of the one he loved, Lydia Grenfell, to be his fiancee, eventually to marry him, and to come out with him to India. From his correspondence we can see that, while he struggled against this attachment to some extent, it also dominated the scene. Quite a lot of what he did was influenced by desires either to get close to Lydia again or to run away from her.

Finally, among the things that happened to him was his failing health. As we trace his career from Cambridge to India into the Arabian Gulf and into Persia, we find again and again episodes of serious ill health. Sometimes mission historians have been anachronistic and have suggested that the deterioration of his health had something to do with being in India or the Gulf or Persia. Charles Simeon's testimony is quite important on this point, because he reports that Martyn frequently said to him, and to Lydia, that, for people who had his sort of health, India was just as healthy, if not healthier, than Britain. In those days there was not the contrast in terms of health care between Britain and countries in Asia as there is today. In the end, it was Martyn's ill health, not his living conditions in the East, that killed him.

*Actions.* Martyn's actions demonstrate that he was anything but a passive individual. He drove himself, even in Cambridge when he was a curate at Holy Trinity. He drove himself in the study of the Scriptures, in reading, in visiting his people, in taking tremendous pains in preparation of his sermons, even when he knew the parishioners would pay little attention to them. He drove himself on the voyage to India; he went by way first of Latin America and then South Africa - a total of nine months in all. As soon as he arrived, he was into
his labors, the extent of which is quite astounding. Consider the number of languages with which he grappled - not only Indian languages but the ancient languages of the Bible. He was corresponding with people in French and also trying to learn Arabic and Persian. He felt that he did not have enough Hebrew to do Arabic, so he first learned Hebrew before he went on to Arabic. All this while he served as a chaplain in the East India Company.

Martyn traveled all over India. He arrived first in Madras, then went to Calcutta, and from there to Cawnapore (Kanpur). He traveled by sea, by river, by land, and then by sea again to the Arabian Gulf, and then overland across Persia. He was a great traveler, always driving himself forward.

He was also a great preacher. He took services not only in English but also in what was then called Hindoostani (similar to modern Urdu). In Cawnapore he developed a congregation with Hindoostani as the language. He was busy in evangelism. The wonderful portrait of one of his converts, Abdul Masih, who became one of the first Anglicans to be ordained in the Indian subcontinent, adorns one of the walls of the director's study in the Henry Martyn Centre, Westminster College, Cambridge (see Abdul Masih). Although Martyn's evangelistic efforts did not bear much fruit in terms of numbers, in terms of quality we can say his efforts were first rate, for they produced some leaders for the Indian church in the early years of the nineteenth century.

He was always pressing to finish his translations into Urdu, Persian, and Arabic, and always wanting to get on to the next thing. Martyn's actions - the way he drove himself in all these areas - affected his health and hastened his death.

**Was Martyn a Martyr?**

Was Henry Martyn a martyr? He certainly was a martyr in the sense that he bore witness to the Gospel in places where, at the time, it had not been heard very much or at all. I often tell people the story of his encounter with the Persian prime minister, who was trying to obstruct the conveying of Martyn's Persian translation of the New Testament to the Shah. The prime minister told Martyn what Muslims believed about the Qur'an, and then he said, "What do you believe about the Bible?" Martyn made the famous retort, "The words are of men, but the sense is of God." He was a faithful witness to the Word.
He was a martyr also in the sense that he endured hardships and even persecution for the sake of the Gospel. The persecution, one must add, was often that of delay and harassment by overbearing people whom he encountered. He was, after all, in a privileged position, for he was often seen as a British official, associated with the East India Company at a time when the empire was just beginning to gain power. Still, while we do not see in Martyn's time the kind of persecution that Christians were to encounter later on in that part of the world, there was nevertheless hardship and persecution, marks of the faithful witness or martyr.

Beyond the ways in which he qualifies as a martyr, Martyn's life raises wider questions about martyrdom and mission in the modern era. But first, by offering a brief overview of the history of martyrdom, I want to encourage a wider perspective than Christians living and educated in the West generally seem to have.

**Martyrs in the Roman Empire**

If we look at the history of martyrdom in the Roman Empire, we see that Christians were martyred for different reasons at different times. In the earliest period they were martyred because it was thought that they committed what the Romans called *flagitia*, or crimes. Among other crimes, Christians were accused of incest and cannibalism. They were martyred not only for such crimes but also because they were thought to have brought misfortune to a particular place. A natural disaster would be seen as due to the crimes the Christians supposedly committed.

Later on, they were martyred merely for naming the name of Christ, *propter nomen ipsum*, where it was simply that the magistrates asked them, "Are you a Christian or not?" and the answer determined their fate. I am reminded here of something that Lesslie Newbigin said in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, that the victory over the Roman Empire was not won by Christians through political struggle but it was won when the martyrs to be knelt down in the arena and prayed for the emperor who, a few moments hence, would be responsible for their death. The courage with which Christians bore their suffering was decisive.

We cannot think of martyrdom in the Roman Empire, however, as something that went on without stopping until Constantine was suddenly converted. It
was sporadic. There were long periods of peace for the church. Sometimes martyrdom was part of a policy of a particular emperor, sometimes it was quite arbitrary. An emperor would be tolerant for some time, and then suddenly there would be a phase of persecution.

**Martyrs in the Persian Empire**

The history of the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire is paralleled by the spread of Christianity in what was then the Persian Empire, the other great superpower of that era. While we know a great deal about the Christian movement from Jerusalem to Athens to Rome, we know relatively little about the spread of early Christianity in the East. If we are to consider the history of Christianity in the Persian Empire, we would have to know Syriac, Pahlavi, and some Turkic languages. The fact that most people in the West do not know these languages has given a bias to Christian knowledge about how the church spread.

If we look at the spread of Christianity within the so-called Persian Empire - which included Mesopotamia, central Asia, Afghanistan, and northwest India (what is now Pakistan) - we discover quite a different history. At the same time, it also had its similarities to Christian history in the west, particularly in the fact that Christianity spread in the teeth of an organized empire that had an official religion - Zoroastrianism. The Persian Magi, who were very influential, were opposed to the spread of the Christian church, and we find persecution breaking out from time to time, incited by different religious groups hostile to the spread of the Christian church.

In the earliest period - the Parthian - we find that, while there was a great deal of local persecution and persecution incited by groups like the Magi, the state was hardly ever involved. The Parthians were replaced by the Sassanids, and they at first repeated the pattern of the Parthians, so that the church was allowed to grow. There was local opposition but no state-sponsored persecution. In some cases the church actually received a welcome because it was being persecuted in the Roman Empire (on the principle that the enemy of the enemy must be a friend).

Then Constantine was converted, and when one of the Persian kings, Shapur II, sent an embassy to Constantine, Constantine responded with a letter saying, "I profess to the Most Holy Religion [Christianity].... Imagine, then, with what joy I heard news, so much in line with my desire, that the fairest
provinces of Persia are to a great extent adored by the presence of... Christians.... I commend these people to your protection." Such sentiments were fine as long as Constantine and Shapur were at peace, but in the year that Constantine died, war broke out between the Persians and the Romans. This resulted in sixty or seventy years of the most violent persecution of Christians in the Persian Empire, at least as extensive as any persecution that occurred in the Roman Empire. Mashiha Zakha, historian of the Assyrian Church of the East (as the Persian Church came to be called), claims that there were at least 190,000 people killed in that persecution. We do not know how many were made homeless, deprived of their property, exiled, and so forth. The Greek historian Sozomen, writing in the fifth century, also points out that the Assyrian Church of the East had a martyrlogy of 16,000 names, comparable therefore to Roman martyrlogy.

Martyrs in the Islamic World

There is also a history of Christian martyrdom in the Islamic world. The Coptic Church in Egypt claims that it has always lived in persecution. The whole history of that church is one of oppression, first by the Romans, then by the Persians, and then by Muslims. This has not stopped at all, even during the time that Christian Byzantium ruled Egypt. Because the Copts were regarded as heretics, Byzantium persecuted the Copts as much as the pagan Romans had. One reason why many of the cities in the East, like Alexandria and Damascus and even Jerusalem, surrendered to the Muslim armies was because they thought Muslim rule might be better than the rule of Byzantium. At first, the conquering Muslim Arabs were few in number and most of their energies went into consolidating their holdings. However, as the Muslim population grew, and as Islamic law was codified into its various schools, the place of minorities such as Christians and Jews became more and more difficult.

In the lifetime of Muhammad, Christians and Jews lived peacefully in peninsular Arabia. For a great part of his life the Prophet had friendly relations with the Christians; he even concluded treaties with them. In the constitution of Medina the Jews were given nearly equal rights with the Muslims. But after Muhammad's death a claim was made that he had said that there should be no other religion in Arabia but Islam, and so, under the caliph 'Umar, both Jews and Christians were expelled from peninsular Arabia. Later on, in the other countries that had been conquered, the development of Islamic law imposed a particular condition on Jews and Christians; they were
regarded as dhimmi, as protected people for whom the Muslims had a responsibility. To some extent this arrangement was an advance on much that happened elsewhere. For instance, there was some recognition, however grudging, that Christians and Jews had the right to live in the Dar el Islam, the house of Islam. It is true that, in periods of greater tolerance, with enlightened caliphs, the Christians and the Jews, and also the Zoroastrians, made a notable contribution to what came to be Islamic civilization. However, we cannot forget that the dhimmi status imposed severe conditions as far as life for Jews and Christians and Zoroastrians were concerned. From time to time persecution broke out, and there were massacres; but even when this was not happening, Jews and Christians were denied what we would call basic rights as citizens. They had to live in a humiliating manner, they had to pay a special tax for being Jewish or Christian, and there were all sorts of institutionalized forms of discrimination against them, some of which have survived to this day. This status of being a dhimmi largely disappeared in the Islamic world under the Ottomans, under the pressure of Westernization and modernization. As Kenneth Cragg has said in The Arab Christian, Christian Arabs played a very important part in the development of Arab nationalism. But recent movements in the Islamic world have made attempts to return minorities to the state of dhimmi, to this kind of protected status that deprives religious minorities of equality as citizens and imposes strict conditions for their life and witness.

**Reasons for Martyrdom**

There are various reasons for martyrdom, including, tragically, Christian prejudice toward fellow Christians. In addition to the example of the Copts and Byzantium, there is also the case of the Jacobites in Syria. Think also of the venerable Fathers Athanasius and Chrysostom. Chrysostom, by the way, was exiled and forced to march, a march that nearly killed him, very near to the place where Henry Martyn was forced to march by Hassan, his escort. Both died near Tokat, an Armenian center, in the cause of Christian witness on a forced march.

As we have seen, naming the name of Christ, in itself, has often been a reason for martyrdom; or even simply being a Christian. This was true not only in the Roman period but it remains true today in some parts of the world for some kinds of people. All a person needs to do to attract persecution and
martyrdom is to receive baptism or confess the name of Jesus Christ. A second reason often is the propagation of the faith. In the Persian Empire, even during the period of greatest tolerance, if a Christian converted a Zoroastrian, the Christian and the Zoroastrian who had been converted were both killed. This was also true in the Islamic period, and remains true today in many parts of the world. Confessing the name in the sense of bearing witness over a long period of time, of having pastoral responsibility, especially responsibility for those who may be converts, also attracts persecution and martyrdom.

Another reason for martyrdom is the feeling among those who are rulers that Christians are somehow disloyal. Taking the Islamic world again, there seems to me to be no punishment in the Qur'an for apostasy, or indeed for blasphemy. But apostasy became punishable by death in the Islamic world, as it did in other parts of the world, because it was seen not only as apostasy (a religious crime) but as rebellion (a political crime). We find often in the course of Christian history that Christians are martyred because they are seen as disloyal, as intruders. As has been said about the martyrs of the South Pacific, they were martyred simply because they were outsiders.

**Kinds of Martyrdom**

What kinds of martyrdom are there? In the Orthodox Church there are three kinds: white, green, and red. White martyrdom is giving up all of one's wealth for the sake of the Gospel and becoming a monk or a hermit. Green martyrdom, while less radical, nevertheless entails living an austere life so that one can experience God more deeply and share God with others. Red martyrdom is the martyrdom of shedding blood. Kallistos Timothy Ware, in his book on the Orthodox Church, observes that the Orthodox had not experienced martyrdom of the blood for a long period until the advent of Marxism. In earlier centuries, however, when Orthodox communities were under the Ottoman Empire, there was much martyrdom of blood.

In today's world we have to say that there are also other kinds of martyrdom that Christians undergo. First is the loss of their status as citizens simply because of their faith, either a loss outright or a reduction in their legal status as citizens with equal rights. We find situations where special laws are applied to them, where they are excluded from the electorate, for instance, where their testimony is not acceptable in a court of law, and so on. In this situation
Christian women are often at a greater disadvantage than Christian men. Then there are the legal penalties that accrue in being a Christian, in practicing the faith, in evangelizing. Once again we find that these penalties are now more and more on the statute books, and even if they are not on the statute books, there can be administrative malpractice or popular prejudice. For example, the way in which church building is regulated in Egypt, or the way in which popular sentiment prevents Christian practice in Pakistan, the way in which an evangelist can be tried in Iran, or the complete prohibition of Christian worship in Saudi Arabia.

I was asked during the recent Lambeth Conference to be interviewed on the BBC radio program “Today,” along with a Muslim anthropologist, Akbar Ahmed of Cambridge, with whom I was delighted to appear. What neither of us knew was that a third party would appear, a Filipino who, while working in Saudi Arabia, had held worship meetings in his house, and had been arrested and tortured for this. That was the most difficult interview that I have ever done!

Persecution and martyrdom can occur in various ways and at different levels. They can occur, for instance, in the family. The family is the most dangerous place sometimes for a new Christian. People can be poisoned or stabbed to death. Esther John, one of the martyrs commemorated in Westminster Abbey, was probably killed at night by a relative, someone she very probably knew. Then there is hostile sentiment in the local community. Again and again, we find many cases in history when townspeople came against some of their number because they had become Christians, and they were persecuted, driven out, or killed. Then there is institutionalized persecution or martyrdom at a national or supranational level.

**Christian Motives for Martyrdom**

If we go back to Henry Martyn and consider his motives, with which we began, we are led to ask about the motives of Christians who accept persecution or martyrdom. Here one must combat certain views. Voltaire and his modern expositor Robin Lane Fox say that Christians in the Roman Empire were martyred because they were intolerant and fanatical. One might accept that if it were not for the *propter nomen*
**Kind of Martyrdom**

*ipsum* kind of martyrdom, where the martyrdom had nothing to do with what the Christians had done or said; they were killed simply because they were Christians. Nevertheless it must be said that there have been occasions when unwise behavior and almost a death wish have led to martyrdom. Two examples come to my mind. One is of the patriarch Shim’un of the Assyrian Church of the East in the Sassanid period. The emperor got very angry with the Christian community and imposed a tax on them that he asked Shim’un to collect. Shim’un refused. He was arrested and brought to the emperor. He then refused to prostrate himself, and the emperor asked why he was not doing this, since he had always done it before. And Shim’un said, "Because you are now anti-Christ." This retort led not only to his martyrdom but to five hundred bishops, priests, deacons, and other faithful being martyred with him. William Young, historian of the Persian church, asks, Was this a necessary martyrdom? I would agree that we must ourselves ask the question.

The other example is that of certain Christian ascetics in Muslim Spain who persisted in deliberate public abuse of the Prophet so that they would be arrested and killed. This led to the odd situation that the Muslim judges did everything to prevent it. They tried to make out that the Christians were insane, or drunk. But the Christians insisted they were perfectly sane and still abused the Prophet, thus compelling the judges to pass the death penalty. There may be a pathological element in some martyrdom, even a death wish. I sometimes wonder whether Martyn had a death wish. Certainly his writings indicate that he wanted to burn out. If he had been a bit more circumspect, not traveled so much, worked at a slower pace, maybe he would not have died at the age of thirty-one. There may be a rather dubious element in martyrdom that, for the sake of fairness, we need to note.

**Questions for Mission**

What strikes me most about Henry Martyn and his readiness to suffer is the way in which he was prepared to cross cultural and linguistic divides, almost forgetting himself in the process - enormous cultural and linguistic divides that were likely greater for him then than they are for us today. Yet a readiness for cross-cultural commitment is something that we do not generally see today in the Christian church. We do not see it in the West, in Africa, or in Asia. People are content to be Christians with their own group; they do not have any desire to cross barriers. This is a
formidable obstacle to mission, not only for global mission but also for local mission. As a diocesan bishop, I am well aware of the number of clergy who want to go to nice areas that they like and are used to. We have difficulty in encouraging people to go to areas of problems, of high population density, with a great deal of development taking place - nobody wants to go there. The whole idea of church is very romantic. People prefer to go to traditional-looking churches. So this is certainly a question for mission today, both global and local - are we willing to cross barriers as Martyn most certainly was?

Second, one reason for martyrdom in today’s world is not just confessing the faith, not simply living in a Christian community, but the struggle against injustice and oppression. Many of the martyrs of Latin America of recent years have been martyred not because they were confessing the faith - people have been doing that for four hundred or so years in Latin America. They were martyred because they were taking the side of the oppressed, the poor, those who were without land. Some of them were very cruelly murdered. Can we speak of such people as martyrs, and if we can, to what extent? Where is the line between martyrdom for the cause of Christ and suffering for political and social beliefs? More and more Christians are taking up particular social and political positions; if this causes them suffering, is it martyrdom? Or must there be a specific sort of odium fidei dimension to persecution, imprisonment, and martyrdom? I do not know the answer to this.

Third, the post-Enlightenment churches in the North and West are increasingly facing a situation where a moral agenda is being forced on them in the name of human rights, in the name of community, in the name of participation in national life, and so forth. When and if the church begins to resist this imposition of an agenda on it, will it result in martyrdom (at least in its broader definition, including persecution, marginalization, and neglect)? I think this is beginning to happen already.

A fourth question for mission has to do with how we support churches that are suffering and that are experiencing martyrdom today. I believe there is too little information about Christians and churches that are suffering. There is too little advocacy of such Christians and churches, too little action to support them. Sometimes it is very difficult to do so, particularly in terms of the logistics of the exercise. I am glad to see the beginnings of change; even governments are now taking an interest in what is happening to Christians and other faith communities.
Finally, persecution and martyrdom are not simply a Christian experience. People of other faiths also face persecution. In Pakistan, for instance, the most persecuted community is not the Christian, it is the Ahmadiyya, a heterodox Muslim sect. In Iran, I believe the Baha’is have sometimes experienced even more persecution than some of the Christian churches. So we need to remember that there are other people also who are willing to suffer and die for their faith.

We should remember also that sometimes people of another faith are persecuted by those who call themselves Christians. This is happening, at present, in the Balkans. We should be clear in our condemnation of such acts and reach out to the oppressed with love and a willingness to be their advocates.

In conclusion, I believe the legacy of Henry Martyn demands of us a rigorous assessment of our commitment to Jesus Christ. Just how far are we prepared to go in faithfulness to the good news of Jesus and the extension of his kingdom of justice and peace? Martyn set a standard that does not let us off easily.