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# Martyn and Martyrs – Questions for Mission

**Michael Nazir-Ali reflects on the life of the missionary Henry Martyn, and more widely on the whole question of how and why Christians have suffered for their faith. Drawing on the experience of persecution in the Eastern Church, a story unfamiliar to many western Christians, Nazir-Ali suggests ways in which the example of Martyn and of countless Christian martyrs is deeply relevant to mission today.<sup>1</sup>**

The life of Henry Martyn raises important questions about martyrdom in the Christian church. In the NT the term *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, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and 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 for the sake of the name of Jesus Christ, and also of being willing even to lose one's life for his sake.

## The life of Henry Martyn

Born in 1781 in the relative obscurity of Truro, Cornwall, Martyn emerges in 1797 at St John's College, Cambridge. Rather lost at first, he gradually finds his feet, masters his subjects, and ends up as senior wrangler in mathematics. At the same time, he comes to commitment to the Christian faith, with all sorts of questions arising in his mind about his vocation. He goes on to be elected a fellow of St John's College, to serve as a curate at Holy Trinity Church with Charles Simeon, and has 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, starting with key attitudes he developed during his years at Cambridge.

Martyn determined resolutely 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. Understanding this attitude of mind is most important if we are to understand Martyn.

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,

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became responsible for the care of his younger siblings. This was a responsibility which he took very seriously, and which prevented him from being a missionary with CMS 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 that family fortune played a great part in the direction that Martyn took.

There was also the loss of members of his family. 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. The loss of his family, particularly of his younger sister, was quite crucial in determining his mind-set.

Then there was the refusal of the one he loved, Lydia Grenfell, to be his fiancée, 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 either to get close to Lydia again or to run away from her.

Another important factor shaping Martyn's life 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 quite serious ill health. Sometimes, mission historians have made the anachronistic suggestion that the state of his health had something to do with being in India or the Gulf or Persia. In fact Charles Simeon reports that Martyn frequently told him, and Lydia, that for people who had his sort of health, India was quite 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 that there is today. In the end, it was Martyn's ill health, not his living conditions in the East, that killed him.

Martyn was an extremely active 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 that the villagers to whom he went would not pay the slightest attention to them. He drove himself on the voyage to India, which took him a very long time indeed and went by way first of Latin America and then South Africa – a total of nine months in all. As soon as he arrived he began his labours, the extent of which is really quite astounding. Consider the number of languages with which he was grappling – 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 always felt that he did not have enough Hebrew to do Arabic, so he had first to do Hebrew before he went on to Arabic. All this while he also had a pastoral position as a chaplain in the East India Company. He travelled all over India. He arrived first in Madras, then went to Calcutta, and from there to Cawnpore (Kanpur). He travelled by sea, by river, by land, by sea again to the Arabian Gulf, and then overland across Persia.

He was a great preacher. He took services not only in English but he began to take services in what was then called Hindustani (similar to modern Urdu). He started preaching in Hindustani and developed, in Cawnpore certainly, a congregation with Hindustani as its language. He was busy in evangelism. The

wonderful portrait of one of his converts, Abdul Masih, who became the first Anglican to be ordained in the Indian subcontinent (he was ordained deacon in 1823 and priest later on) adorns one of the walls of the director's study in the Henry Martyn Centre, Westminster College, Cambridge. Although Martyn's evangelistic efforts did not bear much fruit in terms of numbers, in terms of quality they were first-rate, and produced 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 translation in Persian to the Shah. The Prime Minister told Martyn what Muslims believed about the Koran and then he asked, 'What do you believe about the Bible?'. Martyn made that famous retort, 'The words are of men but the sense is of God', which I think still makes a great deal of sense to us. So he was certainly a martyr in the sense of being a faithful witness to the Word of God.

He was also a martyr in the sense that he endured all kinds of hardships and even persecution for the sake of the gospel, although the persecution was often that of delay, of harassment, by overbearing people whom he encountered. He was, after all, in a very privileged position. He was often seen as a British official and he was associated with the East India Company at a time when the Empire was just beginning to increase its power. 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 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 seem generally 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 or a man-made disaster would be seen as due to the crimes the Christians supposedly committed in a particular town.

Later on they were martyred merely for naming the name of Christ, *propter nomen ipsum*. The magistrates would ask them, 'Are you a Christian or not?' and

the answer determined their fate. I am reminded here of something that Bishop Lesslie Newbigin said in his book, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*: the victory over the Roman Empire was not won by Christians through political struggle but it was won when the martyrs knelt down in the arena and prayed for the emperor who, a few moments later, would be responsible for their deaths. The courage with which ordinary Christians, as well as Christian leaders, bore their suffering was decisive.

However, we cannot think of martyrdom in the Roman Empire as something that went on without stopping until Constantine was suddenly converted. It was very 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.

The history of Christian martyrdom in the Roman Empire is extremely well known in the Western Church, which still remembers many of the martyrs of that period and the different ways in which they bore their suffering.

### **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 the time. In the West, the tradition of study of Greek and Latin has enabled us to know a great deal about the movement from Jerusalem to Athens to Rome. However, we in the West know relatively little about the spread of early Christianity in the East. If we were to consider the history of the spread of Christianity in the Persian Empire we would have to know Syriac, Pahlavi, and some Turkic languages. The fact that most people do not know these languages has given a bias to Christian knowledge about how the church spread.

If we look at the history of the spread of Christianity within the so-called Persian Empire, which included Mesopotamia, what is now Central Asia, Afghanistan, and north-west India (now Pakistan), we discover a quite different history. The church that came into being there was very different from the church in the cosmopolitan towns of Asia Minor, for example. At the same time, what happened here bore similarities to Christian history in the West. Here also the church spread in the teeth of an organised empire which 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 is a great deal of local persecution and persecution incited by groups like the Magi, the state was hardly ever involved, except perhaps once or twice when property was in question. 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 was actually welcomed 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. When one of the Persian kings, Shapur II, sent an embassy to Constantine, he 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 adorned by the presence of that class of men on whose behalf alone I am at present speaking – I mean the 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 the Christians in the Persian Empire, as least as extensive as any persecution that happened 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 martyrology of 16,000 names, comparable therefore to Roman martyrology. All this indicates that the history of martyrdom as often conceived in the West needs re-examining from a fresh perspective, taking account of developments in the East.

### **Martyrs in the Islamic world**

There is a long 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 done. 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. Whether this turned out to be the case or not is a moot point. At first, the Muslim Arabs who had conquered these lands were very few and most of their energies went in consolidating their conquests and entrenching themselves in privileged positions. However, as the Muslim population in these countries grew, and as Islamic law was codified into its various schools as we know it today, the place of even the tolerated minorities, the Christians and the 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 equal rights – or nearly equal rights – with the Muslims. However, after Muhammad's death, it was claimed that he had said there should be no other religion in Arabia but Islam. So, under the Caliph 'Umar, both the Jews and Christians (even those with whom Muhammad had concluded solemn treaties) 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 and before Islam. For instance, there was some recognition, however

grudging, that these people 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 civilisation. On the other hand, we cannot forget that the *dhimmi* status imposed severe conditions as far as life for Jews and Christians and Zoroastrians was 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* very largely disappeared in the Islamic world under the Ottomans, under the pressure of Westernisation and modernisation there. As Kenneth Cragg has said in his book, *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

As we have seen, naming the name of Christ, or even simply being a Christian, have often been reasons for martyrdom. 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 common reason is the propagation of the name. 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, of course, 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, as I have said elsewhere, there seems to me to be no punishment in the Koran 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 also 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. It has been said of the martyrs of the South Pacific that they were martyred simply because they were outsiders.

Of course, in talking about martyrdom, we need to note that martyrdom is not always at the hands of those who are not Christians. Martyrdom results also, tragically, from Christian prejudice towards fellow Christians. In addition to the example of the Coptic Church I mentioned earlier, this is also true of the Jacobites

in Syria. Think also of the Venerable Fathers Athanasius and Chrysostom. Chrysostom was exiled and forced to undertake a march that killed him, very near to the place where Henry Martyn (by a striking coincidence) was forced to march by Hassan, his escort. Both died near Tokat, an Armenian centre.

## 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 does not entail the giving up one's wealth, but nonetheless living an austere life as much as one can, so that one can experience God more deeply and share God more deeply with others. Red martyrdom is the martyrdom of shedding blood. It is interesting in this connection that Kallistos Timothy Ware, in his book on the Orthodox Church, says 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 existed within the Ottoman Empire, there was much martyrdom of blood.

In today's world Christians undergo other kinds of martyrdom. First is the loss of their status as citizens simply because of their faith, either an outright loss 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. And in this situation, Christian women are at a greater disadvantage in some cases than Christian men. Then there are the legal penalties that accrue in being a Christian, in practising 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 1998 Lambeth Conference to be interviewed on *The Today Programme* with a Muslim anthropologist, Professor 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. This was the most difficult interview 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 sometimes the most dangerous place for a new Christian. People can be poisoned or stabbed to death. Esther John, one of the martyrs that is commemorated in Westminster Abbey, was probably killed at night by a relative. And then there is the sentiment in the local community. Again and again, we find cases in history when townspeople came against some of their number because they had become Christians and they were persecuted, driven out, or killed. And then there is institutional 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, this leads us also to ask about the motives of other Christians who allow themselves to be persecuted or to be martyred. What is the motive? Here one has first of all to combat certain misconceptions. 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 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 has to be said that there have been occasions when unwise behaviour and almost a death wish have led to martyrdom. There are two examples that come to mind straight away. One is 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 which 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. Shim'un said, 'Because you are now anti-Christ', or words to that effect. This response led not only to his martyrdom but to five hundred bishops, priests, deacons, and other faithful being martyred with him. William Young, the historian of the Persian Church asks whether this was a necessary martyrdom. I agree that we must ask that question.

The other example is that of certain Christian ascetics in Muslim Spain who persisted deliberately in public abuse of the Prophet so that they would be arrested and killed. Ironically, the Qadis, the Muslim judges, seem to have done everything to prevent their martyrdom. They tried to make out that the Christians were insane, or drunk. But the Christians claimed they were perfectly sane and sober, and still abused the Prophet, thus compelling the Qadis 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. His writings suggest that he almost certainly wanted to burn out. If he had been a bit more circumspect, not travelled so much, worked at a more measured pace, maybe he would not have died at the age of thirty-one. This is a rather dubious element of 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 first of all the way in which he was prepared to cross cultural and linguistic divides, almost forgetting himself in the process; enormous cultural and linguistic divides which must have been much greater for him than they are for us. This cross-cultural commitment is something that we do not generally see today in the Christian church. We do not see it in the West, we do not see it in Africa, we do not see it in Asia. People are content to be Christians within their own group; they do not have this desire to cross barriers. This has become a formidable obstacle to world mission, on a local as well as on a global level. 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 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. Romantic ideas about church-going mean that people want to go to traditional-looking churches, not to modern 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 and suffering for your political and social beliefs? If Christians suffer because of particular social and political positions they adopt, 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 the 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 which are suffering. There is too little advocacy of such Christians and churches, too little action to support them. Sometimes logistics make this difficult. I am glad that this is beginning to change; even governments are now taking an interest in what is happening to Christians and other 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 Christians; it is the Ahmadiyya, a heterodox Muslim sect. In Iran, I believe the Baha'i's have 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 being 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.

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.

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