

Martyrdom in the patristic era



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Introduction

The Patristic era roughly runs about 100 A. D. to 450 A. D. and is considered to be a vital period in the history of Christianity. The period contextualises information regarding early Christians from the period of the death of Apostle Paul to the middle age during the council of Chalcedon (McGuckin 30). The patristic period describes the cohesion between Christianity and Judaism and other theological philosophies. The patristic era is considered to be an essential time for the church history of the most denomination. Most Christian theories and concepts such as the Roman Catholicism and reformed churches which followed Calvin and Zwingli were started during this era. For the first two hundred years of the patristic age, the church was under attack and persecution from most of the Roman emperors. The persecution period was worse in 303 A. D. when Emperor Diocletian persecuted some of his family members including his wife and daughter for following the Christian religion (McGuckin 44).

In 321 A. D. Christianity was legalized and recognized as a form of religion by Constantine. The era of Constantine was characterized as being the opposite of the spectrum concerning the previous ages that were characterized by persecution and punishment. There was an emergence of various geographical regions and cities that marked the importance of the Christianity religion. Some of the towns included Alexandria that became the headquarters of theological education and Antioch that became the center of Christian philosophy and thought. The patristic era is characterized by

considerable doctrinal and theological diversity and flux. The language was a major dividing factor during the patristic period with some churches adopting eastern Greek while others took western Latin. (McGuckin 57)

Origin of Christian Martyrdom

Most emperors, men of letters, and senators largely ignored the Christianity religion and philosophy. A Christian martyr is described as a person who is persecuted and murdered because of their Christian faith and testimony of Jesus (Moss 25). In the early church established during the patristic era, Christian persecution occurred through crucifixion, stoning, burning, and capital punishment. Originally, the term Christian martyrs referred to the apostles who were facing persecution during the reign of some emperors in the Roman Empire. The age of martyrs refers to the early Christian period that occurred before the rule of Emperor Constantine I (Moss 27). Early Christians regarded the martyrs as intercessors whose utterances and powerful intercessions were inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The apostles of Jesus faced challenges and threats, and almost all of them suffered death for their faith and testimony. Martyrdom is considered to be the most significant contribution to western civilization by the temple of Judaism. The concept of martyrdom originated from the development of voluntary death concept for the sake of religion. The idea of voluntary death was developed as a result of the conflict between the Jewish community and King Antiochus Epiphanes IV. The first and second Maccabees recounts several martyrdoms faced by the Jews due to their resistance of the Hellenization of Seleucid overlords. The Jews that showed resistance were

executed for crimes such as refusing to consume pork and other meat sacrificed to idols, performing circumcision on children, and observation of the Sabbath day. (Moss 45)

The origin of Christian martyrdom has been described by two theses which are the Bowersock thesis and the Frensdorff thesis. The Frensdorff thesis states that Christian martyrdom originated in Judaism. Frensdorff argues that the concept of Christian martyrdom is rooted in the Jewish religion. According to Frensdorff's hypothesis, Judaism is described as a martyrdom religion and that the psychology of Jewish martyrdom inspired Christian martyrdom (Moss 56). The martyrdom concept was inherited from the pagan tradition that was characterized by self-sacrifice and the preparedness to suffer for a cause.

The Bowersock thesis is a contrast to Frensdorff's argument since it describes the Christian martyrdom concept as independent and not related to the Jewish persecution practice (Moss 59). Bowersock explains that martyrdom originates from the Roman Empire urban culture specifically in Asia Minor. Despite the differences between the two hypotheses that seek to describe the origin of Christian martyrdom, Judaism and Christianity are defined as two distinct and separate religions. Bowersock challenges the argument that the development of the concept of martyrdom was part of the process of making Christianity and Judaism distinct and separate entities.

Christian Practices that led to the Physical Persecution of Christians

The concept of Christian martyrdom created an interest and respect for the Christian religion leading to an increase in the number of Christians in the Roman Empire. In the first century, the socio-economic and local conflicts

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within the Jewish circle led to their persecution and martyrdom. During the rule of some emperors such as Emperor Diocletian, Christianity was listed as an illicit sect, and a declaration that described the religion as illegal was made. The announcement forced Christians to hold secret meetings which became a target for imaginings. Since the meetings were held at night, the roman rulers considered the meetings to be bacchanalian orgies. (Moss 34)

The Christians were accused of immoral worship practices such as incest because they referred to each other as brothers and sisters, cannibalism since they partook of the blood and body of Christ. The refusal of Christians to worship the foreign gods worshipped in the Roman Empire led to their persecution because they were accused of being atheists and committing treason to the empire. During the patristic era, Christians were described as irrational beings, social radicals, and haters for humanity. Most of the Christians in the early days were poor and uneducated hence were an easy target for those that were seeking wealth and power. (Moss 36)

How widespread was Persecution both geographically and temporally?

The persecution of Christians is traced from the first century to the present day. Emperor Nero organized the first persecution of Christians in 64AD after a fire broke out in Rome. The persecutions and execution of Christians climaxed during the reign of Diocletian during the third and fourth century (Engberg et al 98). Christians in the eastern part of the Roman Empire which was governed by Diocletian suffered the most and lasted until Constantine ascended to power. Other empires that saw the persecution of Christians

included the Sasanian Empire and the Islamic Ottoman Empire (Engberg et al 103).

Most Important Martyrs

Some of the essential Christian martyrs included Polycarp of Smyrna, Saint Afra who died in 304 A. D. during the Diocletian Christian persecution, Saint George who was a soldier in the Roman Empire, Januarius of Benevento who died during the great persecution, and Saint Vincent of Saragossa. Other martyrs include Saint Lucy, Saint Sebastian, Pope Fabian, and Pothinus. (Engberg et al 120)

Works Cited

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