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Autothanatos: The Martyr's Self-Formation

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Martyrdom as Self-Sacrifice

Martyrdom is popularly understood as a selfless act, an act of self-sacrifice for a god or a cause. Much recent scholarship confirms this popular understanding (Cormack 2001; Castelli 2004; Fields 2004; Gaddis 2005; Heyman 2007). In this article, I argue that martyrdom should be understood first as an act of self-formation, not self-sacrifice. To make this argument, I propose two theses. The first is that the most ubiquitous and yet, paradoxically, the most overlooked difference of the martyr is the death. The second is that, in keeping with the qualitative difference of the death, martyrdom is a violent action intentionally acted by the martyr.

Connecting these two theses, I represent the martyr as *autothanatos*, one who enacts self-death, supporting this representation with Martin Heidegger's explication of Being-towards-death. *Autothanatos* represents a move toward recognition of the martyr's agency and of the ubiquity of death and violence, not only in the martyr's actions, but in the discourse of those who remain. The characterization of certain martyrdoms as non-violent is an attempt to control a discourse of violence that martyrs transgress by their excessive acts. In neutralizing this discourse, I hope for a more informed look at the history of violence in the Christian tradition, one which will also contribute to a more balanced assessment of the relationship between religion and violence across contemporary traditions. Establishing the function of death and violence in the Western Christian tradition, then, is to lessen violence as a decisive factor in the categorization, classification, and distinction only of "other" religious traditions. A redescription of the role and function of the early Christian martyr is a step toward that goal.

The popular image of the martyr comes primarily from the early Christian martyrs, and this understanding of Christian martyrdom has become normative in public discourse about martyrdom more broadly. This article engages martyrdom as exemplified in the Christian tradition, and thus any applicability across religious traditions is based upon existential rather than contextual similarity. However, there are historical, theological, and social reasons for the characterization of Christian martyrdom as sacrifice. First, they died in a time when Christianity was in the minority—a *religio illicita*. Following second-century apologist Tertullian of Carthage's claim that "The blood of martyrs is seed," the triumph of Christianity has been tightly linked with the influence of the martyrs; it is thus easy to conclude that the martyrs in some sense died *for* the victory of Christianity over Rome.[1] This is historically (as well as theoretically) inaccurate. On the contrary, a newly-victorious Christian Empire necessitated a shift in the narrativization of martyrdom from anti-institutional to institutional act (Drake 2011).[2]

Second, in a theological sense, the martyr is the heir and imitator of Christ, so the sacrifice of self is not only for Christianity, but for Christ as well. The martyr removes self and puts on Christ, *imitatio Christi*. In addition, just as Christ's death is conceived as a sacrifice for mankind, the martyrs die in memoriam, often in similarly bloody fashion, and serve as intercessors between God and humanity (Castelli 2004; Moss 2010). The rhetoric of self-sacrifice attempts to prevent usurpation of Christ's original and final act of atonement, preserving its theological precedence.

Third, in a social sense, martyrdom is a death-for others, a death that benefits the community (Newman 1971; Bowersock 1995; Gregory 1999; Grig 2004; Sizgorich 2009; Drake 2011). As one compendium of modern and ancient Christian martyrs contends, "Throughout history, many have died so you could experience the faith and

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[1] Tertullian's *Apologeticum* culminates in the final chapter with this challenge to Rome; trans. Glover (1977). W. H. C. Frend (1967; 1984) is one well-known representative of the thesis that the martyrs died for earthly Christianity.

[2] Battling with the Donatists, Augustine argued that it was cause and not punishment that determines the martyr, stigmatizing the hasty martyrdom as suicide (Droge and Tabor 1992; Shaw 2011). This negated the punishment proving the cause under which Irenaeus and Tertullian had justified martyrdom centuries earlier (Moss 2012a). It did not take long for the cause to be wholly inseparable from the authorities who determined it.

freedoms you have today" (DC Talk and Voice of the Martyrs 1999: 23). Martyrdom's characterization as sacrifice preserves the hierarchical privileging of life over death as a foundation for living. The supposed divine compulsion or 'fated-ness' of these past martyrs creates a distance from present circumstances (Droge and Tabor 1992). Those who remain are attracted to the martyr and perceive that attraction as grounded in some fundamental difference, either in the martyr's circumstance or character.

Much twentieth-century scholarship on ancient martyrdom posited this difference of the martyr in an unnatural desire for death that was augmented by Christianity (Riddle 1931; Dodds 1965; Ste. Croix 2006). In the last decade, scholarship on early Christian martyrdom has defended it as a contextually legitimate practice. These more recent studies situate the difference of the martyr instead in the difference of their context from our own (Middleton 2006; Moss 2012a). The question of "voluntary martyrdom" epitomizes this debate. G. E. M. De Ste. Croix argued for a smaller number of actual martyrdoms in the "Great" persecution than commonly assumed (Ste. Croix 1954). His conclusions have drawn much subsequent criticism, primarily over the charge that he lessened the number of martyrdoms by excluding what he called "voluntary martyrs," those who brought martyrdom upon themselves with their aggressive actions (Ste. Croix 1963). Two articles on voluntary martyrdom in the last year have attempted to remove its perceived stigma, arguing that such distinctions between types of martyrdom are overdrawn and were not attested in early Christianity (Buck 2012; Moss 2012b). While these are valid corrections, the articles minimize two important points. First, Ste. Croix's contention that there were a smaller number of total martyrs than traditionally believed is still legitimate even if all voluntary martyrs are included, and this alters the traditional understanding of martyrdom's significance to Christian triumph. Second, and more importantly for my argument, the successful reinscription of these martyrs into the fold by describing their actions as normative does little to explain why they, and not others in their cultural context, achieved martyrdom. These works do not answer the question asked by the earlier generation of scholarship: What was different about the martyr? If an active expectation of and desire for martyrdom was normative, why was it so rarely achieved?

If earlier scholarship supported the agency of the martyr at the expense of her legitimacy, then, more recent scholarship has regained the legitimacy of the martyr's practice in exchange for some of her agency. It does not substantiate a qualitative difference between martyr and non-martyr, either in their context or our own. If the martyr is motivated by a desire for cosmic victory or *imitatio Christi*, are other Christians void of these desires? If so, the reason for and origin of such qualitative difference would have to be explained, and in such a way that martyrs do not become superhuman figures. If not, though, the difference would be quantitative. The martyr simply possesses *more* desire for love, justice, etc., than the non-martyr. This explanation, though perhaps simpler, is unsatisfying, not least because it is immeasurable. The challenge is to find an observable qualitative difference in the martyr that would justify our admiration and provide the foundation for consideration of her context. I propose that the only such difference between the martyr and the non-martyr is the death.

Death: The Qualitative Difference of the Martyr

There are several reasons why this avenue of difference is not often explored in discussions of the martyr. Death appears so ubiquitous as to be banal. Millions die without being attributed the title of martyr; this perhaps gives the appearance that it is a dead end for extensive analysis. Further, despite the central fact of the death in the martyr's identity, it seems morbid, at least in modern sensibilities, to discuss it. We are slightly embarrassed by the explicit, gruesome, and often fanciful accounts of martyrdom, from the Jewish Maccabean martyrs of the second century B.C.E. onward.[3] Behind these reasons, however, lies a fundamental attitude toward death that manifests in fear and avoidance, and this is part of the reason that when the death of the martyr confronts us, we defer instead to abstract notions of nobility, honor, and justice.

Two questions will help reorient our study of martyrdom and suggest why social analysis should be subsequent to an existential understanding of the martyr. The first question: What does martyrdom mean to the martyr? To answer, it is more helpful to move the description of the phenomenon in question from martyrdom, which is social in its

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[3] Scalped, dismembered, and fried alive, the Maccabeans retained enough composure to pronounce judgement on the king as they died (2 Macc. 7). The second-century Christian martyrs of Lyons and Vienne endure similarly terrible tortures with unyielding resolution. Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica,* 5.1, ed. Schaff and Wace (1997). It is medieval accounts of martyrdom such as those in the *Golden Legend* that most frequently stretch the imagination (trans. Ryan 2012).

configuration, and toward death, which is radically individual in its execution. However, not just any death will do. Accidental, unintentional deaths occur regularly; indeed, much more often than cases of martyrdom.[4] What we are interested in is intentional death, for this is the death of the martyr.[5] Intentionality is an indicator that the death-event is not only absolute *and* referential, but that all referentiality is in one sense exhausted in absolution, and thus beyond further analysis.

A seeming paradox must be noted here on two levels. First, the very awareness to the scholar's field of vision of the martyr's death is predicated on a social significance. The martyr *qua* martyr is already in tradition (Heyman 2007). What we must admit, then, is that the corpus of cases is artificially skewed from the beginning. If we do not address this categorization on an existential level, though, the martyr is merely a placeholder for the tradition, a tradition which is rhetorically predicated on the martyr.

The second and corollary paradox is that any universalizing interpretation seems at odds with one that purports to take intentionality into account. This critique is also based on the historical interpretation of individual deaths through an institutional lens. Historical exegesis isolates the individual case from an (artificially) constructed group and examines it to discursively reaffirm the cohesiveness of the group while giving the appearance of individuality. In other words, the martyr dies first and foremost as a *Christian* martyr. The death, an idea and event that is both radically individuating and universally experienced, is the existential topos that predicates this social interpretation of the individual as martyr.

The second question that will help reorient our study of martyrdom follows upon the first: If the death is intentional, how may it more accurately be described? Describing the martyr's death as sacrifice entails a willing victimization with an 'in-order-to.' This description directs the analysis away from the martyr toward either causes or effects, neutralizing the most radical and only indispensable component of the transaction: the death itself. Part of the difficulty lies simply in the artificiality of pinpointing the object of our analysis. In freezing the momentum of the death, we remove its critical liminality, its transitional nature. In our inability to determine what, if anything, lies beyond death, it is the coincidence of its radical openness and finality that contributes to its appeal.

This nature of this finalization deserves to be further specified as well. One of the normative ways to privilege religious deaths or distinguish those deaths that are deserving of remembrance and those that are not is with the qualifier of violence. Through the manufacture of non-violent martyrdom and its preference over the more common and banal violent death, we mark certain deaths with meaning. This is problematic for many reasons, not the least of which can be observed on a daily basis in the losses of life in distant lands that pass with disregard; their violence renders them undesirable. Through the reinterpretation of death as non-violent, we render certain deaths memorable or preferable. This classificatory system of death betrays itself, for violence represents the transgressive, which intentional death in each case is. Obfuscation of the ubiquity of this violence lies at the heart of our misattribution of social meaning to the individual martyr. I will take this up again shortly.

In response to these questions, I read death first through its finality *and* liminality for the agent before its function for those who remain. The martyr's death is in this sense not a loss of self; rather, it is assertion and finalization of the self. To unite the constituent parts of a reformulation for a hermeneutic for understanding martyrdom, a different term will be employed here. The martyr, who anticipates death and actively finalizes identity with regard to this horizon, is more appropriately described as *autothanatos*.

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[4] These have no bearing here because there is no indication in such cases that the event of death is at all referential. This is certainly not to say that the death in such cases is unimportant to the agent. There is an existential importance in any case, but we can say little else about the death.

[5] Intentionality is not commensurate with modern understandings of suicide, the denunciation of which is a form of institutional control. See Note 2 above. Neither do I intend to equate intentionality exclusively with the voluntary martyrs (Ste. Croix 1963; Ste. Croix 2006; Moss 2012b). The appellation "martyr" necessarily intends volition (Boyarin 1999:121). It is beneficial to consider differently cases in which the death was directly self-actualized (e.g., shooting oneself in the head or throwing oneself off of a precipice), and death achieved by the participation or manipulation of another agent. These distinctions, though, which are criteria for some scholarly definitions of the voluntary martyr, are subsequent to my primary level of analysis.

There are many phrases, none of them preeminent, that describe self-killing; they are roughly divided between those that emphasize the killing and those that emphasize the dying (Daube 1972). There are reasons to prefer the latter here. The usage of a term that reflects dying rather than killing will resist importing a moral valuation. The killing of the self is quite obviously, despite the appearance of legislation against the act, not subject to social sanction. Self-formation through death reflects a gain of identity rather than its loss through rejection of political or ecclesiastical citizenship, which is secondary to the actor. Yet to imply the violence and represent the intentionality of the act, the element of self must also be included.[6]

It is ineffective to explain martyrdom as contextually normative when the vast majority of Christians have not been martyrs, and when given the opportunity, have chosen flight or evasion as life-prolonging responses.[7] Even if it is the case that martyrdom represents a truer form of Christianity, this tells us little about the individuals themselves. This "purity" perspective is a means of dismissal, motivated by guilt, anxiety, or pragmatism, which concludes that the path of the martyr cannot and should not be the way of most.[8] While the *autothanatos* is difficult to pinpoint, the term aims at a more comprehensive understanding of the martyr from the martyr's perspective.

Heidegger and the *Autothanatos*

Because of its extensive exploration of the existential fact of death in relation to an ontological understanding of Being, Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* provides an effective tool for explicating the *autothanatos*. A brief outline of his argument, especially as it relates to death, is necessary to observe martyrdom from the perspective of the *autothanatos*. Heidegger's goal is to uncover, insofar as is possible, the nature of Being. To do so, he describes the uniqueness of humanity with the appellation *Dasein,* indicating that it is the 'there' (*Da*) of 'being' (*Sein*) that is critical and constitutive for it. *Dasein*'s uniqueness lies in the fact that its Being is an issue for it; *Dasein* is ontological (Heidegger 1962: 32). For this reason, *Dasein* cannot be understood by comparing it to other entities in the world. However, *Dasein* tends to fall back on exactly this, interpreting its self-understanding through the world, through institutions, through tradition. Heidegger explains the forgetfulness that results:

> When tradition thus becomes master, it does so in such a way that what it 'transmits' is made so inaccessible, proximally and for the most part, that it rather becomes concealed. Tradition takes what has come down to us and delivers it over to self-evidence; it blocks our access to those primordial 'sources' from which the categories and concepts handed down to us have been in part quite genuinely drawn. Indeed it makes us forget that they have had such an origin, and makes us suppose that the necessity of going back to these sources is something which we need not even understand (1962: 43).

What should be readily understood is not that tradition is misleading or deceptive, but that it is a signifier that has been progressively empowered as signified. Death is the ultimate inevitability mitigated by this signified. Although death is practically acknowledged as ubiquitous and unavoidable, it is rather life through which being is usually

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[6] Daube (1972) comprehensively catalogs the various terms for suicide in the ancient world; the Greeks are responsible for much of the variety. *Autothanatos* has the advantage of cases of historical usage as well. The adjectival term was first used by Plutarch in the 1st century C.E., though its nominalized form is not attested until the 4th century.

[7] Early Christian bishops and apologists wrestled over the legitimacy of flight in persecution, but many, such as Cyprian of Carthage and Dionysius of Alexandria, chose that option and had to justify their actions in retrospect. At the turn of the 3rd century, the more zealous Tertullian of Carthage argued in *De Fuga in Persecutione* that Christ's command to flee in persecution (Matt 10:23) had expired in the apostolic age (ed. Roberts and Donaldson 1965).

[8] Brad Gregory claims, "There was nothing esoteric about the martyrs—their beliefs and worldview are stated in the period's most elementary catechisms. Accordingly, the extremism of martyrdom should not be understood as a fanaticism of the fringe, but as exemplary action. Martyrs were exceptional in their behavior, but not in their beliefs and values. Were this not the case, friends and family members would not have urged them to persevere" (Gregory 1999: 8). This response downplays the action by implying that the "beliefs and values" were what was more important. Thus while affirming the martyr, most refuse to imitate the martyr. The closeness constructed belies a psychological act of distancing, by both the Christian and the scholar.

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interpreted. Establishing a non-coextensive relationship between life and *Dasein* is therefore necessary to prepare the way for an authentic understanding of the radical individuality and, therefore, identity-forming capacity of death. The foundation of rights or Being on life is rather a dictation of the terms of death.

Life, as Heidegger explains, already presupposes Being and will thus not help us in understanding it. The totality of all involvements (with other entities—the world or environment—but not other *Dasein*) always leads back to *Dasein* as the final 'for-which' of all involvements; in other words, humanity is the ultimate end in itself (1962: 116). With this in mind, *Dasein* is always faced with a choice, to comport itself toward some authentic or inauthentic potentiality (1962: 119). This potentiality for Being Heidegger describes is usually understood as either individual or social, but is equally both. However, tradition interprets socially, not individually, and consequently emphasizes life in a function of self-preservation.

Because *Dasein's* "being there" entails environmental and personal interaction, it is constituted by the element of care. This care (*Sorge*) is shown in concern (*Besorgen*) with other entities and solicitude (*Fürsorge*) with other *Dasein*. Care manifests itself in anxiety, and this anxiety makes *Dasein* aware of its radical individualization, providing the possibility for both inauthentic and authentic responses (1962: 235). Heidegger works backwards from here to *Dasein*'s ontological ground. Truth, authenticity, is to be sought not in other entities, things or other *Dasein*, but in the potentiality of the self. The circumscription of possibilities that takes place in *Dasein*'s daily living furthers its inauthenticity in most involvements, but particularly in its involvement with death, for death is a universalizing ground for the potentiality of *Dasein*.

Death, both as pragmatically understood and as outlined by Heidegger, is an end. Having been biologically brought into the world through birth, and ontologically always already-having-been thrown into a world, death stands as the final limit *and* possibility for being complete. Because of this, death, as the latter end of *Dasein*'s time, is always the implicit limit against which authentic and inauthentic potential is gauged. "Death," as Heidegger puts it, "is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein" (1962: 294). While death can and should be seen as both limit and possibility, it is most often seen only as the former, a border not willingly crossed. Our *autothanatos*, on the contrary, actively manages the possibility and liminality of death.

Death, in its radical individualization, in its fulfillment of possibility, is also a shattering of community. Thus, as regards death, there are multiple means of social tranquilization, as I noted above. The evasion of death's certainty and potentiality, however, is an evasion of the ground of Being, and thus inauthentic. We have been given a preliminary answer to the first question. Martyrdom, as the death of the *autothanatos*, constitutes an authentic potential for Being, or at least a comparatively more authentic one than everyday *Dasein's* avoidance of death.[9]

The *Autothanatos* and the Martyr

Heidegger does not directly address the question of the martyr in *Being and Time*. He does, however, comment on the most direct and intentional comportment toward death.

> Manifestly Being-towards-death…cannot have the character of concernfully Being out to get itself actualized. For one thing, death as possible is not something possible which is ready-to-hand or present-at-hand, but a possibility of *Dasein's* Being. To concern oneself with actualizing what is thus possible would have to signify bringing about one's demise. But if this were done, Dasein would deprive itself of the very ground for an existing Being-towards-death (1962: 305).

This passage appears to indicate that the intentional death is an inauthentic Being-towards-death because of the active hand it takes in actualizing the potential Being-towards-death. This appears to have much in common with the fragile (and in practice readily permeable) boundary between death as a means and as an end in discussions of Christian martyrdoms. There is something simpler happening in the passage, however. Heidegger is indicating that one's comportment toward death, if it is to be authentic, cannot be one of concern, that comportment which one has toward entities (non-*Dasein*) in the world. To put it another way, if one attempts to actualize death in relation to one or more of *Dasein*'s involvements in the world, then death is not authentically actualized, i.e., in relation to Being.

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[9] It is notable that the English word 'authentic' comes from the Greek *autoentes*, which came into usage in the ancient period as a way of describing suicide. (Daube 1972).

Although analogous to Christian rhetoric about martyrdom, this existential deconstruction is something different, as it is rendering a qualitative distinction from the perspective of the *autothanatos*, not those who remain. Heidegger is reemphasizing one of the constitutive elements of *Dasein*, whose Being, in Being, is at issue for it. This is care, manifest as anxiety, which in turn can be authentic or inauthentic. It is in turning to the world, to entities within the world, that *Dasein* in this case becomes inauthentic. Simply, an entity cannot bring about a resolution of the question of Being. The larger point is that a resolution of the question of Being is not what is called for in an authentic Being-towards-death. The actualization of Being-towards-death *in concern* closes off the possibility of *any* Being-towards-death.

For Heidegger, authentic Being-towards-death is, in a word, anticipation. Anticipation can be conceived not as an actualization, but as a radical openness towards the potentiality of Being. Death provides the most radical individualization of this potentiality, what Heidegger calls one's "*ownmost* potentiality-for-Being" (1962: 307). It thus cannot be an embracing, an actualization of any of the grasped possibilities for potentiality of Being. Any death, as a 'death-for' ontological possibility is an inadequate response to the question of Being. The step from this ontological abstraction to its practical application is much less. The martyr *qua Christian* martyr resolves the question of Being inauthentically. This is a partial answer to the second question with which we began, how martyrdom can be more authentically be described. In part, this is through a move from martyrdom, a foundationally social description, to *autothanatos,* an individual and existential descriptor. But this must be explained further, since it is around the question of martyrdom, not the *autothanatos*, that questions of authenticity are traditionally centered.

The death of the *autothanatos* is usually reinterpreted as martyr in one of two influential ways. The first is as an impetus to, or provision for, life. This is not simply a theological principle, although it is readily seen in a Christian context. Death is viewed in opposition to life. The intentional death of the other is thus aberrant and abhorrent. A substitutionary theory that harnesses the power of the death of the other for the living allows for stasis with the dead and an explanation for their alienation. The death of the other becomes functional. This attempt to artificially appropriate the Being of the *autothanatos* is also an unwillingness to face the persistence of one's own death. The second way to read the death of the *autothanatos* is as a model to be literally imitated, duplicated. This is the category within which early Christian martyrs are often placed. Yet in each of these ways, death is reinterpreted. First, it is externalized. Death therefore cannot be seen as a radical individualization because it is not owned; on the contrary, the death of the other becomes a value for my own existence, like the soldier's death for my freedom. Death as imitation must occasionally be tolerated as a literal if discomforting interpretation, but death as food for life, as sacrifice for me and for Christianity is the normative contemporary institutional stance.

Heidegger's explication of Being-towards-death, then, is antithetical to a social explanation of the martyr. Being-towards-death serves to call *Dasein* from the certainty of tradition. In calling *Dasein* toward its most central potentiality, conscience calls *Dasein* into mystery or openness (1962: 322). The delimiter of death gives *Dasein* leverage, so to speak, to hold itself in the call of conscience, what Heidegger describes as resoluteness (1962: 314). But why be resolute? Heidegger's aim is to introduce a state of potentiality-for-Being-a-whole, wholeness (1962: 349). The question is how to resolve anticipation (ontological as part of the structure of Being) in an authentic Being-towards-death, and resoluteness (ontical as a potential characteristic of existence), in an authentic potentiality-for-Being. Heidegger rhetorically asks,

> What if resoluteness…should bring itself into authenticity only when it projects itself not upon any random possibilities which just lie closest, but upon that uttermost possibility [death] which lies ahead of every factical potentiality-for-Being of Dasein…What if it is only in the anticipation of death that resoluteness, as Dasein's *authentic* truth, has reached the *authentic certainty* which *belongs* to it? (1962: 350).

Death is the only certain delimiter of Being for *Dasein*, and for this reason it unifies; yet it also radically individuates because it cannot be taken on by another. It also cannot be actualized through entities, but must constantly be held open. It is only through a resolute anticipation of death that an authentic Being can be sustained.

This explication of Being allows us to highlight the commensurability of the martyr and non-martyr, on an existential level exclusively separated through the death, but ontologically identical in potential for authentic comportment. However, this paradigm shift toward an explicit awareness of the grounding of death is radical in that it serves to relativize all subsequent structural certainties, even those of traditions that systematically build upon the

universality of death. Here is the paradox of the Christian martyr, because at the point where we are ontologically closest to uncovering an authentic comportment of Being, we are practically farthest away because the model is instantiated as an institutional historical entity rather than a constitutive mode of Being.

Over and against the reading of Christian martyrdom as an instantiation of non-violent self-sacrifice with its constituent loss of identity, we should read the martyr as the *autothanatos*, the violent, intentional self-death as a radical act of identity assertion, of autonomy. The question of violence has political importance, for the classification of authentic deaths as non-volitional is prompted by the perceived necessity for the true martyr to be nonviolent. That is, violence is given a negative moral value; it is thus disallowed from tainting beneficial deaths, which are correspondingly labeled nonviolent in nature. Thus, a reassessment of the relationship of violence to martyrdom is necessary to complete the representation of martyr as *autothanatos*.

The Ubiquity and Potentiality of Violence

As noted, there are several reasons why martyrdom is traditionally described as sacrificial. Because sacrifice implies a 'death-for,' there is first an immediate redirection of the death towards life, the lives of those remaining and that of the institution. Of course, within Christianity, the language of sacrifice maintains the Judaic tradition of divine involvement with the events having taken place.[10] It is also more generally a protection of the hierarchization of life over death, permitting extinction while preserving the norm of seemingly willful existence. Sacrifice as a descriptor performs another critical task. It implies non-violent participation in a transaction that would otherwise be understood as violent in its very nature. The moralistic presumption is that violence is transgressive, inappropriate, and undesirable. In Christianity, the willful bloody death of Jesus ironically establishes a theoretical paradigm for non-violence, yet only by narrowly skirting the trap of a later Christian morality that prohibits the *autothanatos*.[11] From the perspective of the cross, Jesus Christ was necessarily divine, for if he were not, he would be the ultimate of sinners and criminals. In the same way, martyrs can be accepted only if *imitatio Christi*, for they can then be associated with the same façade of non-violence.[12]

To put it another way, violence, at least from one perspective, is intentional. It has an agent. Attribution to the divine is evidence of the need for an origin of violence, which is at its most frightening when not precisely locatable. Intentionality is also a usurpation of power, an autonomy, a disregard for externals, and this is socially intolerable. Ironically, the event that laid precedent for all Christian martyrdom also necessitated that all subsequent iterations be given the primary quality of mimesis and thus divested of the quality that gave significance to the founding event. Yet, just as the theological solution displaces death through eternal life, an ideological substitution simply displaces one type of violence for subtler and more pervasive forms.[13] A reorientation of our understanding of violence, then, will augment the importance of the *autothanatos*.

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[10] However, see Douglas Hedley (2011: 13) for a contrasting view that takes pride in the continuity of ideas of pagan and Christian sacrifice in that "Christianity does not shirk the terrors of our experience." It is in fact the familiarity, though, that paradoxically keeps "the terrors of our experience" most distant.

[11] The prohibition, of course, comes later, and the death is re-presented through the institutional paradigm. See note 5 above.

[12] This is where Candida Moss's argument that the martyrs thought of themselves as *alter Christus* is most significant. If martyrs were not imitators, but rivals, they introduce an unwanted element of competition to the tradition that threatens the founding exception of violence. (Moss 2010). This distinction between violent and non-violent became critically important in Late Antiquity, rising with the need to distinguish between heretical groups who killed themselves in the face of orthodox pressure and the gentle martyrs of the Catholic Church (Gaddis 2005; Shaw 2011).

[13] In Late Antiquity, however, the violence was not so subtle. As H. A. Drake (2011) has noted, the rhetoric of martyrdom as non-violent grew as part of a Constantinian imperial discourse that attempted to counter the increasingly violent notion of a martyr who threatened imperial authority and took the propagation of orthodox Christianity to deadly measures. See also Gaddis (2005). Thomas Sizgorich (2009) has shown the transfer of the martyr's violence into a symbolic role in Late Antique Christian and Muslim identities. The martyr sharply defined community and religious boundaries, allowing other Christians to transgress them.

Violence has no inherent moral value, and it is in part because of its religious investment with the character of a moral violation that it must necessarily be misrecognized, albeit in different modalities, in the martyr, soldier, and citizen (Žižek 2008). In showing that the classification of deaths as violent or non-violent is based upon secondary moral presuppositions, we will remove or lessen the moral weight which clouds our understanding of the *autothanatos* as self-forming. Violence is neutralized by showing its ubiquity in our regular transactions.

Georges Bataille contends that violence is opposed to work, to productivity, to community (Bataille 1962: 41). He argues that man is discontinuous, feeling completely alone, though surrounded by others. At the same time he feels aware of a lost continuity or the possibility of creating continuity, something more than himself. Violence is an attempt to reach that continuity. The difficulty, of course, is that individual violence sets itself over and against the monopoly of violence held by the institution (Foucault 1995; Agamben 1998). To limit the unauthorized violence enacted by members of the community, then, violence becomes subject to regulation. This regulation certainly acts in a legal and punitive form, but it also is inculcated in a moral form in, for example, the nearly universal prohibition against killing. Violence is a transgression, and transgression obtains an immoral value. Unregulated violence cannot be permitted in the community; it is anti-institutional. As a result, the use of violence is masked by a simple prohibition against its use. However, it is not really violence that is the source of moral wrongness, but the transgression of the prohibition against it.

What Bataille's analysis indicates is that it is not violence itself that raises the question of moral culpability, but the agent who wields it. The advancement of a discourse about nonviolence is the assimilation of violence into the community, for its preservation. With non-violent discourse, all traces of excess are removed and the rhetoric of necessity prevails. Violence is rightly recognized as a weapon of the institution. The ability to designate violence, then, is directly correlative to the extent of authority.

If violence itself is not morally weighted, neither, at least initially, is its prohibition. As Bataille indicates, the sphere of work is diametrically opposed to violence in that it requires regulation, the blunting of excess. The deregulation of all forms of violence is the return to an animalistic state, a disavowal of that which differentiates humanity. On the other hand, our ability to examine and understand violence is predicated on a circumscription of its use (Bataille 1962: 38). The fact, then, that the disavowal of violence is socially necessary assigns moral culpability neither to the agent nor the institution. The reason that the awareness of its necessity is critical, on the contrary, is that it is precisely the necessity that leads to its misrecognition. If violence appears to be a phenomenon in one instance and not in another, its appearance becomes synonymous with moral culpability. If, on the contrary, violence is removed from latency and exposed in all its manifestations, it appears as a neutral construct and forces a more critical analysis of the genesis and telos of transgressive acts.

Bataille is effective in showing the ubiquity of violence, in some sense giving flesh to the skeleton of *Dasein* that Heidegger constructs. Violence is constituent to Being-towards-death. However, Bataille's move of clarification through dichotomization must to a certain extent be reversed. He suggests that death is the pinnacle of violence, because it "jerks us out of a tenacious obsession with the lastingness of our discontinuous being" (Bataille 1962: 16). It is this premise of death, not as violence, but as a disruption of discontinuity that must be challenged, for it falls prey to the religious ideology it is attempting to escape. This is most apparent in Bataille's discussion of the sacrifice, which he sees as the breakthrough of continuity into a discontinuous existence:

> The victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals. This is what religious historians call the element of sacredness. This sacredness is the revelation of continuity through the death of a discontinuous being to those who watch it as a solemn rite. A violent death disrupts the creature's discontinuity; what remains, what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one. Only a spectacular killing, carried out as the solemn and collective nature of religion dictates, has the power to reveal what normally escapes notice (1962: 22).

From one angle, Bataille's description could not be more accurate. Understood from the perspective of those who remain, sacrifice engenders continuity.[14] For the *autothanatos*, however, death must be prefigured as the ultimate of discontinuous experiences. Bataille employs sacredness in the pre- or non-Christian, more general sense of being set apart, being marked, which indeed explicitly requires discontinuity. The victim, as sacred, is set apart from the community. However, the death of this sacred victim appears as a continuity to the spectators, not to the victim him or herself. Sacrifice, the ritualization of death, is designed to render continuous, whether executed in the temple or in the penitentiary. The mistake is in the assumption that continuity holds true for the victim as well. The ritual of the sacrifice, in engendering continuity for those who observe it, fools the participants into positing the retroactive continuity of the sacrificial victim as well, when it can only have performed this function by the victim having rendered himself discontinuous. Once dead, of course, the "continuity of all existence" that the onlookers experience is a confirmation of the reality of the community, not any sense of solidarity with the victim, the now-dead sacrifice. It is true that the sacrifice "has the power to reveal what normally escapes notice," but its revelation is not the death itself, which has been made evidence of victim's continuity by the audience. Rather, in its ritual appropriation of the fundamental ground for Being, taking the significance of the event for use by those who remain at the moment the victim crosses the boundaries, the sacrifice reveals the power of the community, the institution, in refashioning the death as life.

For Heidegger, this (mis)understanding of the participants would be an example, even in the event of death, of the individual (*Dasein*) identifying itself as the Other (1962: 150). The ritual of the sacrifice, the celebration of the death, becomes a way to avoid death. The death of the victim perpetuates the life of the participants, and they maintain themselves as a social self, impervious to death. As the meaning of the ritual has been pre-determined, the radical individuation of death is effaced, its power denied. The end result is that the death of another is reconfigured as an opportunity to evade death, to deny the discontinuity that it implies for the dead (Heidegger 1962: 303).

Bataille's analysis, then, gives an ontical appearance the power of an ontological reality. The "continuity of all existence" that is experienced by the onlookers is the otherness of the world as mediated by what he calls "the collective nature of religion." The victim is used as a foil to reiterate the solidarity of those who remain. Any ontological continuity, such as awareness of the potentiality of the death for the victim, is neither emphasized nor usually realized in the death of the other. There is certainly a sense in which life is experienced as a radical aloneness, and death serves as a sort of return to solidarity. If it indicates anything beyond the singular yet important commonality of death, however, it must suggest a life-after-death, and remains beyond our analysis. Before death, social organization strives to create continuity among individuals, delimiting their positions with one another and with the world. Death, for those who remain, has the power to burst through this constructed social continuity. It serves as an intolerable thorn in the side of continuity, and ideological safeguards are established in order to prevent even the death of another to be seen as a disruption to social continuity.

The import of this analysis is that the death of the *autothanatos* should be understood first as identity-forming rather than identity-effacing. The violent death of the *autothanatos*, for those who remain, *should* be and *can* be experienced as potentiality, as representing the possibility for identity-formation. However, it is *usually* experienced as an occasion for solidarity with others and a separation from death. Tradition allows a reaffirmation of inauthentic comportment.

It has been critical to elaborate on the perspectival distinction of the martyr to bring out these differences. Martyrdom, to the martyr, springs from the possibility of authenticity. This is why the term *autothanatos* has been employed, because the death for authenticity's sake, whether itself authentic or not, requires volition. Reading the death as sacrifice obscures this volition directed toward the potentiality of death and thus perpetuates the social

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[14] René Girard, who configures the violence of sacrifice as a substitutionary violence to stave off societal breakdown, similarly argues that the sacrifice is viewed from the perspective of the order that ensues from it, and is thus misunderstood. However, like Bataille, he contends that the sacrifice effaces difference because it displays exposure to death. It is precisely this death seen externally, with the substitution that the sacrifice implies, that keeps an authentic Being-towards-death at a distance (Girard 1979: 43, 48). A recent volume has been published on sacrifice in the ancient Western world, the introduction of which provides a concise historiography on theories of sacrifice, including Girard's. (Knust and Várhelyi 2011).

fiction of death as something that can and must be avoided. Reading violence as something ubiquitous, though, not only in death but also in transgression, serves as a preparatory ground to view the limit and potentiality of death ontologically.

The Enigma of Intentionality and the Lesson of the Martyr

Answers have been provided, at least in a preliminary way, to the primary questions posed above. Martyrdom to the martyr is an attempt at the finalization of Being, an attempt to approach wholeness. As such, the martyr is described as *autothanatos* in order to center analysis around the individual component of intentionality. The comparative presence of intentionality in the *autothanatos* and its relative lack in the everyday *Dasein*, the non-martyr, indicates that the actions of the former represent a more authentic approach toward death, and thus toward Being, than the latter. While showing a distinction, however, this also indicates the separation is existentially closer than ideologically perceived. There is indeed a qualitative difference between the dead and non-dead, but the Being which precedes it is only quantitatively distinguished, based upon volition.

I have also suggested why the death of the martyr is seen as an identity loss rather than an identity formation. A partial response was given in exposing the consistent attempts to obscure the ubiquity of violence, to cover its presence in some locations while announcing its exercise in others. This obfuscation of violence hides the violence of appropriation of the martyr's death for the individual. The violent, intentional death of the *autothanatos* paradoxically serves as a reaffirmation of life for the one who remains only because the martyr is seen as radically other, and thus qualitatively different. This otherness is thought to reside in the martyr, rather than in the death itself.

What remains unanswered, then, is whether we can identify the *autothanatos* as inauthentic in an absolute sense or fill out a more complete hierarchy of authenticity in a comparative sense. If a Being-towards-death, if violence, is ubiquitous, is there a better way than the finalization of potentiality, a concrete actualization, in intentional death? The question is whether the event of the death is determinative of authenticity, from an objective perspective. From such a perspective, in fact, the answer is simple. If the intention of the martyr is for fulfillment of potentiality in death, then s/he gives up an authentic Being-towards-death, and thus Being-a-whole. This is indeed how the martyr has historically been measured, although for different reasons than those used here. The authenticity of the martyr as Christian martyr has, since Late Antiquity, been contingent upon not manifestly courting death.[15] Some martyrs have proven more amenable to this goal than others, and some have been abandoned for their inability to be assimilated. It almost goes without saying that the appropriate telos for the martyr as Christian martyr is not commensurable with the *autothanatos*.

Insofar as we can determine the intention of the martyr, though, an objective comportment toward death cannot support any construction of absolute authenticity. Our ontological problem is that even death, reckoned as an event, though indicating the ground for all resolution, when taken as a thing in itself becomes yet another involvement in the world towards which one cannot be authentically comported. Heidegger essentializes this paradox: "Death, as the end of Dasein, is Dasein's ownmost possibility—non-relational, certain and as such indefinite, not to be outstripped. Death is, as Dasein's end, in the Being of this entity towards its end" (1962: 303). Just as evasion of death, retreat into any myriad involvements in the world unsatisfactorily approaches the issue of Being, so also does the headlong rush toward its resolution. What concerns us here is the "certain and as such indefinite" quality of death; relentless pursuit of either pole of this paradox is an inauthentic response to the anxiety such a paradox produces. Death is the signifying ground of one's "ownmost possibility." As this possibility, then, death *is* Being-towards-Death, "the Being of this entity towards its end." Death as an observable event is a secondary and unstable signifier of a comportment toward death, which is determinative of authenticity.

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[15] See note 13 above. The Council of Elvira, the date of which is the subject of dispute, provides one example. Having taken place in the western Roman Empire in the vicinity of the Great Persecution, its accurate dating would provide a greater understanding of the extent of persecution in the West. In any case, its legislation against illegitimate martyrs, those who courted death by damaging pagan property, is telling of a discomfort for an overly-aggressive stance (Ste. Croix 2006). However, this distinction between types of martyrdom is also present in the at least third-century martyrdom of Polycarp, in which the hasty confession of Quintus led to his apostasy. Bishop Polycarp instead waited patiently to be sought out by the authorities. Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica,* 4.15, ed. Schaff and Wace (1997). See also Moss (2010; 2012a), who argues for a third rather than second-century dating of the martyrdom.

The larger problem, simply, is that this comportment is objectively undiscoverable. Between the finality of death and the indeterminacy of volition many interpretations are possible by those who remain. Indeed, that problem is what prompts this argument. However, indeterminacy does not entail an absence of volition. We cannot purport to be able to determine the authenticity of the *autothanatos*, even with multiple indicators. Realizing this inability introduces an epistemological humility that should prompt a more rigorous delineation of perspectives, that of the *autothanatos*, of those who remain, and even of the scholar.

With the traditional sublimation of death in martyr stories, death is neutralized through its interpretation as an implicit means to an explicit end, a death-for those who remain. The significance of the death of the *autothanatos* cannot be relegated to a secondary position, because it forms the ever-present ground for the possibility of authenticity. What we ultimately cannot determine is precisely what the religious tradition fears—whether the death of the martyr was an end in itself, independent of social function. In examining martyrdom, we do not have the privilege of a decision in absence; we must maintain an authentic openness as well. A judgement of the actual martyr from an ontological perspective cannot be completed, in short, because of the elusiveness of volition. We can neither definitively measure it, nor even determine its absence or presence, but only attribute its likelihood or unlikelihood in a comparative sense.[16]

This attempt at empirical verification should be indicative, however, of the beginning of the process of obfuscation, an attempt to deny an authentic Being-towards-death, concurrent with the transformation of the death as an impetus for the life of the individual and the institution, turning autonomy into self-sacrifice. Reversing this reading uncovers the obscured violence laden throughout the tradition of the martyr. In returning agency to the martyr as the *autothanatos*, we are forced to wrestle directly with the paradoxical limit and potential of death and the ways it has violently been interpreted by and through the martyr.

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[16] Even in martyrdoms where the would-be martyr expresses a clear desire for death, the picture is not much clearer. The intensity with which the Bishop Ignatius's desire to die is expressed, for example, is difficult to overlook and has been much discussed, particularly around the question of voluntary martyrdom. He epitomizes what seems to be a spirit of self-sacrifice as he looks forward to being wheat ground into bread by wild beasts. Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica,* 3.36, ed. Schaff and Wace (1997). This serves as a reminder that it is entirely possible that a martyr looked at death through a similar lens as those who remain. In the cases such as Ignatius where this seems more obvious, however, it is also clear that the benefits of such sacrifice accrue not primarily to the Christian community, but to the martyr. Thus the self-sacrifice is more significantly a self-fulfillment, one that those who remain cannot bear to attribute to the martyr's death. Though it is correct that pathologizing Ignatius does little to explain his actions, neither does attributing his actions to "the logical conclusion of a broader, theologically grounded worldview" when few other Christians came to this logical conclusion (Moss 2012a: 55).

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