

Noble Death or Death Cult?

Pagan Criticism of Early Christian Martyrdom¹

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Suffering and persecution forms an almost ubiquitous backdrop to most of the documents which make up the New Testament. In the first extant piece of Christian writing, the epistle to the Thessalonians, the apostle Paul suggests persecution is an ever present danger. He claims that his converts ‘received the word in much affliction (ἐν πολλῇ θλίψει; 1.6)’ and received at the hands of their fellow townsfolk the same kind of persecution believers in Judea suffered from the Jews (2.14). This theme continues throughout the New Testament. As Jesus had suffered, so true Christians were called to imitate his example, embracing death where necessary (cf. Mark 8.34-38). From St Paul onwards, suffering was regarded not as an unfortunate necessity, but as a mark of true discipleship. Martyrdom quickly became the ultimate act of ‘following the Lamb wherever he goes’ (Rev 14.4). Christians reflecting on these experiences promoted themselves, as Judith Perkins has demonstrated, as a community of sufferers.² Their worship of an executed criminal, their novel rites, and scorning of state, city, and familial gods made Christians so unpopular that Luke could have one of his characters write of Christianity, ‘We know that everywhere it is spoken against’ (Acts 28.22).

While William Bramley-Moore asserted in his introduction to Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* that ‘the history of Christian martyrdom is, in fact, the history of Christianity itself’,³

¹ A version of this paper was given to the Early Christianity between Judaism and Hellenism Section of the European Association of Biblical Studies/International Society of Biblical Literature meeting in Amsterdam, July 2012.

² J. Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London: Routledge, 1995).

³ John Foxe, *The Book of Martyrs: Revised with Notes and an Appendix by the Rev. William Bramley-Moore* (London: Cassell, Petter, and Glapin, c.1875).

it is now generally recognised there was little in the way of official persecution of the Christians before the mid-third century. Christian populations did undoubtedly experience hostility and some violence, but prior to Decius there was no state-wide action taken against Christians. Instead, anti-Christian actions tended to be local and sporadic. Even so, themes of persecution, suffering, and martyrdom are prominent in the writings produced by early Christians.

In their martyr accounts, Christians promoted those who endured suffering and death as heroes. The martyrs were examples of piety from whose example other Christians could learn how to be true followers. As we will see, Christians promoted the martyr as an example of a noble athlete or combatant who example of courage, endurance, and bravery. It seems they expected these virtues to be appreciated by Romans stepped in the tradition of Noble Death. But to the puzzlement of the Christians, pagans⁴ were unable to see the nobility in Christian martyrdom. Tertullian expresses surprise that apparent early Christian enthusiasm for martyrdom had caused pagans to dismiss them as a ‘desperate reckless race’, while at the same time, these same people regarded those Graeco-Roman figures who embraced death, even taking their own lives, as paragons of bravery worthy of high praise.

The very desperation and recklessness you object to in us, among yourselves lift high the standard of virtue in the cause of glory and of fame. Mucius of his own will left his right hand on the altar: what sublimity of mind! Empedocles gave his whole body at Catana to the fires of Etna: what mental resolution! A certain foundress of Carthage gave herself away in second marriage to the funeral pile: what a noble witness of her chastity! Regulus, not wishing that his one life should count for the lives of many enemies, endured these crosses over all his frame: how brave a man—even in captivity a conqueror! Anaxarchus, when he was being beaten to death by a barley-pounder, cried out, “Beat on, beat on at the case of Anaxarchus; no stroke falls on Anaxarchus himself.” O magnanimity of the philosopher, who even in such an end had jokes upon his lips! I omit all reference to those who with their own sword, or with any other milder form of death, have bargained for glory.⁵

⁴ I use ‘pagan’ as a non-pejorative term for ancients who were neither Jews nor Christians.

⁵ Tertullian, *Apology* 50.

Tertullian goes on to list several other examples from the canon of Graeco-Roman Noble Death, and wonders why the pagans should hold these deaths as exemplary, while despising Christian martyrdom, which at least in Tertullian's eyes, surpasses these pagan examples. This essay takes up Tertullian's query.

Martyrdom and Spectacle

Early Christians appeared to have pagan audiences in mind through the composition of *apologia*. However, at least some martyrologies appear to have been designed for the same purpose. Tertullian famously observed the evangelistic effect of persecution and martyrdom: 'The more we are mown down by you the greater in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed'.⁶ Similarly, in the *Martyrdom of Apollonius* this claim is repeated: 'The more they kill those who believe in him, so much the more will their numbers grow by God's aid.'⁷ Keith Hopkins, in his study of the number of Christians in the first three centuries,⁸ agrees that it was in the mid-third century onwards, when Christianity suffered from its most intense period of persecution, that 'in spite of temporary losses...Christianity grew fastest in absolute terms.'⁹

Martyrdom was a public spectacle for both Romans and Christians.¹⁰ Romans dispensed justice in the arena on what was almost an industrial scale,¹¹ and law-breakers were

⁶ Tertullian, *Apology* 50.

⁷ *Martyrdom of Apollonius* 24. Unless otherwise stated, translations of martyr texts are taken from H. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

⁸ K. Hopkins, 'Christian Number and Its Implications.' *J ECS* 6 (1998), 185-226.

⁹ Hopkins, 'Christian Number', 198.

¹⁰ See D. G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1998); D. S. Potter, 'Martyrdom as Spectacle' in R. Scodel (ed.), *Theatre and Society in the Classical World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 53-88.

¹¹ For a fascinating discussion whether Roman punishment functioned as 'human sacrifice' see Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 36-43.

punished in public to act as a deterrent for would-be deviants.¹² Seneca, among other philosophers, reasoned that punishment had to be severe in order to serve its purpose as a deterrent;¹³ graphic, painful, and humiliating deaths, such as exposure to the beasts, being burned alive, or crucifixion for condemned criminals, reinforced the State's power and authority. The public nature of such punishment was important for the full implications of its message to be appreciated. As one Roman noted:

whenever we crucify criminals, the most heavily used routes are chosen where the greatest number of people can watch and be influenced by this threat, for every penalty is aimed not so much at the offence as at its exemplary value.¹⁴

Executions in public encouraged a corporate revulsion of the activities which made the perpetrators enemies of the state. However, in re-enactment of popular mythologies, punishment became theatrical and served as public entertainment.¹⁵ So Tertullian recalls:

we often saw Attis, that god from Pessinus, castrated, and a man who was burnt alive had taken on the role of Hercules. We laughed at the mockery of the gods in the lunch-hour spectacle.¹⁶

Seneca captures the readiness of the crowd to encourage acts of killing:

By chance I attended a midday exhibition expecting some fun, wit, and relaxation, an exhibition at which men's eyes have respite from the slaughter of their fellow-men. But it was quite the reverse. The previous combats were the essence of compassion, but now all the trifling is put aside and it is pure murder. The men have no defensive armour. They are exposed to blows at all points... In the morning they throw men to the lions and the bears; at noon they throw them to the spectator... The outcome of every fight is death, and the means are fire and sword. And when the games stop for the intermission, they announce, 'A little throat-cutting in the meantime, so that there may still be something going on!'¹⁷

¹² See the important article by K. M. Coleman, 'Fatal Charades: Roman Executions stated as Mythological Enactments.' *JRS* 80 (1990), 44-73. Coleman notes that the modern notions of 'correction' are largely absent from the Roman justice system, which was instead motivated by retribution.

¹³ Seneca, *Clem.* 1.22.2: 'It is more difficult to control oneself when one is exacting revenge out of anger, than when one is doing it for the sake of example.'

¹⁴ Ps.-Quintilian, *Decl.* 274.13

¹⁵ See Coleman, 'Fatal Charades'.

¹⁶ Tertullian, *Nat.* 1.10.47.

¹⁷ Seneca, *Epistles.* 7.3-5

The blood-thirstiness of the crowd are similarly satisfied in *The Martyrs of Lyons*, where some of the Christians endure ‘whips...mauling by animals, and anything else that the mad mob...shouted for and demanded’.¹⁸

The sacralised nature of Roman execution¹⁹ places the events of the arena not simply in a judicial context, but within a moral and religious framework. Through refusing to honour state and local deities, Christians threatened the social, moral, and religious fabric of the Empire and faced execution in the arena. Importantly, for the Romans, this did not constitute *persecution* of Christians; it was *prosecution* of individuals deemed to be a threat to the State.²⁰

Not all miscreants experienced such brutal punishment for their crimes. Rome operated with a twin-track justice system with those of noble status (*honestiores*) enjoying punishments less harsh and degrading than the *humiliores*. The former were (in theory at least) exempt from flogging, torture, burning, crucifixion, or execution, except in cases of treason.²¹ The low status accorded to Christians is indicated by the manner of punishments recorded in their martyrologies. Flogging,²² torture,²³ exposure to beasts,²⁴ crucifixion,²⁵ and burning²⁶ are all employed against the Christians in the Acts of the Martyrs. Moreover, the contempt in which the Christians were held along with what is deemed to be appropriate

¹⁸ *Martyrs of Lyons* 38.

¹⁹ Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 40.

²⁰ See P. Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity* (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 40-70 on the clash between Christians and Rome.

²¹ The classic study is P. Garnsey, *Social Status and Legal Privilege in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970). See also R. A. Bauman, *Crime and Punishment in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1996).

²² *Martyrs of Lyons* 38.

²³ For example, *Martyrdom of Carpus* 23; *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 2.2.

²⁴ For example, *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 3.1-2; *Martyrdom of Perpetua* 19–21.

²⁵ For example, *Martyrs of Lyons* 38.

²⁶ *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 15.

punishment is revealed in Tacitus' description of Nero's attempt to shift suspicion of causing the great fire from himself to the Christians.

Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome...Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.²⁷

Tacitus clearly does not believe that the Christians were guilty of causing the fire,²⁸ yet he considers the punishments to be appropriate for 'a class hated for their abominations' who display 'hatred of the human race' (*odio humani generis*). As in the martyr acts, Christians are thrown to beasts, crucified, and burned.

Even if Tacitus does not accurately record the events some half a century prior to his writing, he almost certainly reflects a popular attitude to Christians in his own time. Pliny the Younger confirms this negative view in his correspondence with Trajan:

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For *I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished.*²⁹

Neither Pliny nor Tacitus appears to know very much about Christian beliefs. Nonetheless, both have developed such a negative view of Christians to believe they deserve punishment for their attitudes rather than any specific criminal activity. Christians were *humilores*

²⁷ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.

²⁸ Tacitus believes Nero started the fire as did Pliny the Elder (*Natural History* 17.1, 5), Suetonius (*Nero* 38), and Dio Cassius (76.6). Interestingly none of these writers mention the Christians in relation to the fire.

²⁹ Pliny, *Epistles* 10.96 (emphasis added).

deserving of the most cruel and public punishment and correction. In the arena, these wrongdoers who slighted the Roman gods were humiliated and executed, which in turn restored the honour of gods and reinforced the Roman view of the world.³⁰

However, Christians took these same events and transformed experiences of humiliation and death into victory and winning life. The Christians read their experiences in the arena not as criminals undergoing trial, but athletes and gladiators enduring a cosmic conflict.³¹ Christian descriptions of trials and martyrdoms liberally employ language of the games,³² whether or not they faced death in the arena.³³ Those who desire to follow the martyrs' example must undergo training and preparation for the contest.

Gathering here...we celebrate the anniversary of his [Polycarp's] martyrdom, both as memorial for those who have already fought the contest and for the training and preparation of those who will do so one day.³⁴

Tertullian explicitly employs athletic or military metaphors in his writing on martyrdom. He saw the Christians as soldiers serving under God's oath not to commit idolatry.³⁵ Trials or interrogations of Christians, with the pressure placed on the believer to recant, marked the fulcrum of battle.

I am challenged by the enemy. If I surrender to them, I am as they are. In maintaining this oath, I fight furiously in battle, am wounded, hewn in pieces, slain. Who wished this fatal issue to his soldier, but he who sealed him by such an oath.³⁶

This oath (*sacramentum*) taken by Tertullian, which he also commends to other Christians, finds a parallel in the oath taken by gladiators (*sacramentum gladiatorum*): 'I will endure to be

³⁰ For the mutually incompatible world views of Christians and Romans, see Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 54-70.

³¹ See Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 79-82, 128-34.

³² For example, Tertullian, *Scorpiace* 6; Origen, *Exhortation* 17-20; *Martyrs of Lyons* 1.42; 2.6-8; *Martyrdom of Fructuosus* 6.1

³³ For example, *Martyrdom of Carpus* 35; *Martyrs of Lyons* 1.1; 1.17; *Martyrdom of Perpetua* 10; Origen, *Exhortation* 1, 17-20, 34, 42, 49; *Martyrdom of Ignatius* 5.

³⁴ *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. 18.3.

³⁵ So for example, Tertullian, *Ad Martyras* 3.

³⁶ Tertullian, *Scorpiace*. 4.4.

burned, to be bound, to be beaten, and to be killed by the sword'.³⁷ In Christian retellings of trials and executions those condemned as criminals become into gladiatorial athletes, who endure torture and hold to their confession, and win martyrdom.³⁸

We see this transformation in the *Martyrs of Lyons*, where the weak slave girl, Blandina becomes a noble athlete (gennai~oj a) qleht/h/j) who defeats the torturers through her power (duna/mewj).³⁹ Similarly, the catechumen Martus is said to be a noble contestant (gennai~on a) gwnisth/n).⁴⁰ The martyrs display the noble characteristic of endurance (u (pomoh/), the quality an athlete develops in self-training for the contest.⁴¹ In the *Martyrdom of Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonicê* athletic imagery and endurance are closely connected. During his torture, Papyrus 'endured' three pairs of torturers as he is scraped, and by not uttering a sound 'received the angry onslaught of the adversary like a noble athlete'.⁴² Papyrus' silence under torture, points to another element, borrowed from the games that is crucial in the description of martyrdom: the importance of public witness.

In Christian martyrologies the crowds become an important literary character. To be sure, there are occasions where they are hostile,⁴³ such as demanding the martyrs' arrest or appearance,⁴⁴ calling for certain punishments,⁴⁵ or desecrating the remains of the martyr.⁴⁶ In

³⁷ Petronius, *Satyricon* 117.

³⁸ For discussion of the language of the games in martyr texts, see the study by L. S. Cobb, *Dying to be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 33-59; Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 72-82.

³⁹ *Martyrs of Lyons* 17-19

⁴⁰ *Martyrs of Lyons* 17.

⁴¹ Ignatius, *Eph.* 3.1; see also *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 2; *Martyrs of Lyons* 1. 6, 7; *Martyrdom of Potamioena* 4-5. For the training of gladiators to produce endurance, see L. Robert, *Les Gladiateurs dans L'Orient Grec* (Paris: E. Champion, 1940), 16-23. Endurance is identified as the key element in Ignatius strategy to confront suffering (*Magn* 1.1; *Tall* 4.1). Compare *T.Job* 17:7 where endurance is considered better than anything.

⁴² *Martyrdom of Carpus* 35.

⁴³ *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 12.2; *Martyrs of Lyons* 1.3; 1.15; 1.17; 1.30; 1.39; 1.50; 1.53; 1.57; *Martyrdom of Potamioena* 3.

⁴⁴ *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 3.2; *Martyrs of Lyons* 1.43.

⁴⁵ *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 12.2, 3; *Martyrdom of Perpetua* 18.9.

these depictions, what the Christians say about the crowds matches the attitudes recounted by Seneca. However, on other occasions, they express amazement at the courage of the martyrs. The soldiers and the governor are amazed at Polycarp's piety and joyful courage, and express sorrow at the fate of such an old man.⁴⁷ As Polycarp dies, 'even the crowd marvelled that there should be such a difference between the unbelievers and the elect'.⁴⁸ In other texts, the apparent happiness of the martyrs causes the crowd to be amazed.⁴⁹

The possible impact of their deaths on the pagan crowds was not lost on the Christians, and they urged one another to die well for the sake of the unbelievers.⁵⁰ The texts seek to engineer sympathy and admiration for the martyrs:

After being tossed a good deal by the animal, she no longer perceived what was happening because of the hope and possession of all she believed in and because of her intimacy with Christ. Thus she too was offered in sacrifice, while the pagans themselves admitted that no woman had ever suffered so much in their experience.⁵¹

The historicity of such accounts scarcely matters. The crowd's reaction elevates the bravery and nobility of the martyrs and acts to strengthen the resolve of those who may also undergo martyrdom.⁵² The deaths of the Christians were a public testimony to unbelievers.⁵³

Who indeed would not admire the martyrs' nobility, their courage, their love of the Master? For even when they were torn by whips until the very structure of

⁴⁶ *Martyrs of Lyons* 1.57; 1.60. Polycarp's remains are cremated at the instigation of 'the Jews' (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 17.1-18.1).

⁴⁷ *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 7.3. 12.1.

⁴⁸ *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 16. See also *Martyrdom of Carpus* 38-39.

⁴⁹ *Martyrdom of Carpus* 38-39

⁵⁰ Origen, *Exhortation* 2, 36. Given the importance of gladiatorial imagery, it is interesting to note that the importance of putting on a good show was also important to the gladiators. See especially Seneca *Tranq.* 11.4.

⁵¹ *Martyrs of Lyons* 1.56. See also the examples of the martyrs who made light of their burden (*Martyrs of Lyons* 1.6); Blandina (1.19); Alexander (1.52); Papyrus (*Martyrdom of Carpus* 35); a crowd who endured the sword without a word (*Martyrdom of Perpetua* 21.8); and Polycarp, who is given strength to endure the flames without being nailed to the post (13.3-14.1). See also *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 2.2; 13.3; *Martyrdom of Carpus* 35; *Martyrs of Lyons* 19, 51, 56. See also *Martyrdom of Isaiah* 5.8-14.

⁵² *Martyrs of Lyons* 1.11; *Martyrdom of Apollonius* 47.

⁵³ *Martyrdom of Carpus* 40; Eusebius *H.E.* 5.2.4-5; *Martyrdom of Marian* 6.1; *Martyrdom of Fructuosus* 6.3.

their bodies was lain bare down to the inner veins and arteries, they endured it, making even the bystanders weep for pity.⁵⁴

Kathleen Coleman notes that despite such alleged sympathy to the martyrs there are no instances where the crowd called for Christian prisoners, which leads her to doubt whether Christians ever received much public sympathy.⁵⁵ This may indeed be the case. However, it is also true that a dramatic rescue would not suit the purpose of the martyrologist who wishes to demonstrate to other Christians that martyrdom should be chosen rather than cowardice. Ultimately, the crowds are at the mercy of the martyrologist rather than the other way around.

Christians not only reinterpreted the trials and martyrdom in the arena positively, they also confronted the Roman narrative that they were abominable criminals deserving of humiliating torture and death. Tertullian contrasts the behaviour of Christians in the arena from other criminals.

You find that criminals are eager to conceal themselves, avoid appearing in public, are in trepidation when they are caught, deny their guilt, when they are accused; even when they are put to the rack, they do not easily or always confess; when there is no doubt about their condemnation, they grieve for what they have done...But what is there like this in the Christian's case? The only shame or regret he feels, is at not having been a Christian earlier. If he is pointed out, he glories in it; if he is accused, he offers no defence; interrogated, he makes voluntary confession; condemned he renders thanks.⁵⁶

The attitude to suffering and torture distinguishes Christians from those who would seek to avoid pain and death. Similarly, many Christian texts show the martyr confronting the hostile crowd by staring directly at them.⁵⁷ It was expected that the condemned would fear the crowd and lower their eyes. Staring down the enemy was considered to be a sign of bravery. Pliny the Elder recounts that of Caligula's twenty thousand gladiators, only two were able to

⁵⁴ *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 2.2.

⁵⁵ Coleman, 'Fatal charades', 58

⁵⁶ Tertullian, *Apology* 1.10-13.

⁵⁷ See C. A. Barton ('Savage Miracles: The Redemption of Lost Honor in Roman Society and the Sacrament of the Gladiator and the Martyr.' *Representations* 45 [1994], 41-71), 48-49 for examples.

stand unflinching when threatened, and were therefore considered to be invincible.⁵⁸ In Christian texts, it is the martyrs who fulfill this role. Polycarp not only looks straight at the crowd, denounce them as atheists, while shaking his fist.⁵⁹ Perpetua and Felicitas also win their confrontation with the crowd, as Perpetua stares defiantly as she enters the arena.⁶⁰ Moreover, later in the narrative, it is the crowd who cannot bear to look upon the naked figures of Perpetua and Felicity; it is they who lower their eyes and so play the part of the condemned in the narrative. In reality, it is far from clear whether anyone would have noticed such acts of defiance from the Christians. However, the literary presentation of these events turns common criminals into noble warriors and athletes

Christian Noble Death

In recasting criminals condemned to die in the arena as gladiators who exhibit qualities of nobility, bravery, and endurance, Christians evoked the ancient Noble Death tradition. The insensibility to or endurance of pain was celebrated by Seneca, who regards examples of courage not only athletes, but those tortured in the arena as examples to be emulated.

What blows do athletes receive on their faces and all over their bodies!
Nevertheless, through their desire for fame, they endure every torture, and they undergo these things not only because they are fighting but in order to be able to fight. Their very training means torture...Think of all the brave men who have conquered pain...of him who did not cease to smile, though that very smile so enraged his torturers that they tried upon him every instrument of their cruelty. If pain can be conquered by a smile, will it not be conquered by reason? You may tell me now of whatever you like-of colds, hard coughing-spells...yet worse than these are the stake, the rack, the red-hot plates, the instrument that reopens wounds while the wounds themselves are still swollen and that drives their imprint still deeper. Nevertheless, there have been men who have not uttered a moan amid these tortures. 'More yet!' says the torturer; but the victim has not begged for release. 'More yet!' he says again; but no answer has come. 'More

⁵⁸ Pliny the Elder, *Historia Naturalis* 11.54.144

⁵⁹ *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9.2.

⁶⁰ *Martyrdom of Perpetua* 18.2.

yet!' the victim has smiled, and heartily, too. Can you not bring yourself, after an example like this, to make a mock at pain?⁶¹

Christian martyrology could almost have been written in answer to Seneca's rhetorical challenge. Christians employed the noble qualities of, courage, athleticism, and endurance, as they depicted their heroes not as common criminals, but as conquering and victorious warriors, as they successfully resisted all attempts to make them recant their beliefs. The moment of victory was of course a successful death. As we have noted, Tertullian attempts to persuade his hostile audience that Christian martyrdom is comparable, if not superior to Noble Death. Why was this rhetorical strategy unsuccessful?

Tertullian mentions among the categories of Noble Death those who had bargained for glory with their own sword, and suicide could indeed be counted among ancient Noble Death. There was no word in either Latin or Greek corresponding to our word 'suicide' with its negative connotations.⁶² Indeed, in the ancient mind, self-killing in the correct circumstances was considered to be an honourable practice.⁶³ In general terms, the circumstances of one's suicide, rather than the act itself, determined whether or not it counted as a 'Noble Death',

Socrates and the Philosophers

Perhaps the most famous example of Noble Death is that of Socrates (469-399 BCE), who convicted of impiety (a *se/beia*) and corrupting the young, was sentenced to death by an Athenian court. Rather than go into voluntary exile, he chose death through drinking

⁶¹ Seneca, *Epistles* 78.15-19.

⁶² See the studies of ancient suicide by A. L. van Hooff, *From Autothanasia to Suicide: Self Killing in Classical Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1992); and Y. Gris , *Le Suicide dans la Rome antique* (Montreal/Toronto: Bellamin, 1982).

⁶³ Important is A. J. Droge and J. D. Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992); and J. W. van Henten and F. Avemarie, *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2002).

hemlock. Epictetus enthusiastically approves of Socrates' refusal to avoid death by exile: 'He saves himself by dying, not by flight' (4.1.165). Similarly, Plato has Socrates say that the philosopher should welcome death, since through it one attains the greatest blessings (*Phaedo* 64A). Plato portrays the death of Socrates as a voluntary act, and commends the practice; others are urged to come after him as quickly as they could (*Phaedo* 61BC). However, the Platonic Socrates does not approve of self-killing in all circumstances. Individuals belong to the gods; one should not destroy what is not one's own to destroy. However, he reasons, when the gods place a necessity (ἀναγκή) upon an individual, then self-killing is permitted.⁶⁴ For Socrates, death is no tragedy: 'So long as we have the body, and the soul is contaminated by such an evil, we shall never attain completely what we desire, that is, the truth'.⁶⁵

Other philosophical schools echoed Socrates' ambivalence towards death. For Epicurus neither life nor death contributes to the good life; they are adiaphorous.⁶⁶ The dead are simply as they were before they were born.⁶⁷ The Stoics displayed a similar ambivalence towards death. Death is inevitable, and for Seneca, to be alive is to be in the process of dying.⁶⁸ For the Stoics, the decision to take one's own life should be rational: 'the wise man will for reasonable cause make his own exit from life, on his country's behalf or for the sake of friends, or if he suffer intolerable pain, mutilation, or incurable disease'.⁶⁹ Plato added three further instances to the philosophers' judgements of when a person should take his or her own life: when ordered to do so by the State; the experience of devastating misfortune; or

⁶⁴ A. J. Droge, 'Mori Lucrum: Paul and Ancient Theories of Suicide.' *Novum Testamentum* 30 (1988), 263-86.

⁶⁵ Plato, *Phaedo* 66B.

⁶⁶ Epicurus, *Diss.* 2.19.13.

⁶⁷ Epicurus, *Cic Fin* 1.49

⁶⁸ Seneca, *Epistles* 1.2. See J. M. Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

⁶⁹ Diogenes *Laertius* 7.130; see also Aristotle *Eth. Nic.* 1169a. However, Aristotle also regarded suicide to escape poverty as cowardly (*Eth. Nic.* 1116a12-14).

in the face of intolerable shame.⁷⁰ Shame was one of the more common reasons for Noble Death in the ancient world. In Anton van Hooff's major study on self-killing in the ancient world, more than one third of the total of suicides catalogued is motivated by shame.⁷¹ If the Stoics were positive or at least indifferent towards death, the Cynics were in some cases very enthusiastic, and many killed themselves for what appear to be rather trivial reasons.⁷² In the main, most philosophical schools accepted there were circumstances in which self-killing was justified or could be considered noble.

The most glorious form of Noble Death was that achieved heroically in battle for the homeland. Euripides writes of the Trojans, 'in the first place [they] died for their fatherland – the noblest glory of all'.⁷³ The most famous expression of this phenomenon is Horace's dictum, *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*.⁷⁴ A similar form of Noble Death is *devotio*, a voluntary death where life was deliberately surrendered to ensure victory, usually through a form of contract with the gods. So, in the Samnite Wars (340BCE), the Roman general Publius Decius Mus, devoted himself to the gods of the underworld, then rushed headlong towards a violent death against the opposing army to secure victory for his depleted army.⁷⁵ Similarly Menoeceus and Polyvena also volunteered for death in order to save their respective cities.⁷⁶

These factors combine with the motivation through shame when generals faced certain defeat on the battlefield. After his defeat by Caesar, Cato the Younger stabbed himself rather than being forced to ask his enemy to spare his life. By so doing he remained

⁷⁰ Droge, '*Mori Lucrum*', 266

⁷¹ Van Hooff, *Autothanasia*.

⁷² Droge ('*Mori Lucrum*', 267) concludes there is 'little evidence the Cynics possessed a fully worked out theory of suicide'.

⁷³ Euripides, *Troades* 386-87.

⁷⁴ Horace, *Od.* 3.2.13.

⁷⁵ Livy 8.9.6-10

⁷⁶ Euripides, *Phoenissae* 930-59; *Hecuba* 38-41

his own master.⁷⁷ Similarly, having been defeated by the Parthians in 53BCE, Roman soldiers killed themselves to avoid falling into enemy hands, but Publius, unable to despatch himself, ordered his shield bearer to finish him off.⁷⁸ Death in the face of defeat is usually portrayed by the narrators as a positive and appropriate noble option.⁷⁹ Noble death was essentially a means of restoring honour or asserting control over one's life where that was threatened.

Judaism and Noble Death

If the Christians were not so good at getting across the 'nobleness' of their martyrs, Jews had less trouble. The Maccabean martyrs' deaths 'for others', for the law, and for the fatherland can plausibly be cast as Noble Deaths. Josephus, who of course was writing for a Roman audience, certainly employs Noble Death tropes in his recounting of Jewish history, as van Henten, Feldman, and Williams⁸⁰ have all noted. His extended discussions on suicide—in favour of the practice, in the case of Masada (*War* 7.320–388), and against it, in the case of Jotapata, when his own life was at risk (*War* 3. 362–382)—draws heavily on the Graeco-Roman philosophers, especially the Phaedo, from which he quotes near verbatim.⁸¹ Again,

⁷⁷ Plutarch, *Cato* 69-71.

⁷⁸ Plutarch, *Crassus* 25.11. There is a striking similarity here with Saul's death (1 Sam. 31.1-5), with both texts probably picking up a common fear among those engaging in battle of falling into enemy hands. See Middleton, *Martyrdom: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 10-11.

⁷⁹ Lucan, *Bellum Civile* (4.447-581) recounts the story of the general Vulteius and his men who find themselves surrounded by Pompeians crossing the Adriatic. Holding off until nightfall, and with no possibility of victory, the engage in mutual suicide. The general arguing, 'No one can be forced to die who wishes to die.'

⁸⁰ J. W. van Henten, 'Martyrion and martyrdom: some remarks about noble death in Josephus' (in J. U. Kalms, F. Siegert [eds], *Internationales Josephus-Kolloquium Brüssels 1998* [Münster: Lit, 1999], 124-41), 136. For further discussion see especially van Henten *The Maccabean Martyrs as the Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study in 2 & 4 Maccabees* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 210-22; L. H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); S. K. Williams, *Jesus Death as Saving Event: The Background and Origin of a Concept* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1975).

⁸¹ For a discussion, see D. Ladouceur, 'Josephus and Masada' (in L. Feldman and G. Hata (eds), *Josephus, Judaism and Christianity* [Brill: Leiden, 1987], 95-113), 97-101. This includes a near *verbatim* quotation in *War* 3.372. For a discussion of the presentation of Jewish martyrdom and suicide in this period, see D. Goodblatt, 'Suicide in the Sanctuary: Traditions on Priestly Martyrdom.' *JJS* 46 (1995), 10-29.

themes of honour, especially favouring death over slavery or humiliation are central. So for example, Herod's brother, Phasael, captured by the Parthians, killed himself despite his hands being tied by hitting his head on a rock. Josephus invites his readers to

admire his courage, for though he knew that he was marked for slaughter, he did not look upon the death as a terrible in itself but believed that it was a most bitter and shameful thing to suffer at the hands of a foe...thus he deprived the enemy of the power of killing him as they pleased (*Ant.* 14.368).

Phasael's actions clearly fall within the scope of the Noble Death in avoiding capture on the battlefield.

Similarly, in the books of the Maccabees, Razi goes to extraordinary lengths to kill himself in order to avoid capture by the Seleucid soldiers (2 Macc. 14.37-46). After several unsuccessful suicide attempts by sword and throwing himself off a wall, he disembowelled himself and threw his innards over the mob. The author of 2 Maccabees clearly regarded Razi as a hero and a defender of the Law, indeed, he is dubbed 'Father of the Jews' (2 Macc. 14.37).⁸² Earlier in the narrative, the elderly scribe, Eleazar takes on a similar 'fatherly' role. He is tortured in order to force him to abandon his ancestral laws by eating pork. On account of his age, the courtiers offer him an opportunity simply to pretend to eat pork. However, Eleazar refuses the offer on account that many of the young would be led astray (2 Macc. 6.24). Eleazar instead offers himself as a model of how Jews should die:

by manfully (avndrei,wj) giving up my life now, I will show myself worthy of my old age and leave to the young a noble example of how to die a good death willingly and nobly for the revered and holy laws (2 Macc. 6.27-28).

The author employs the language of Noble Death in his presentation of Eleazar's resistance to torture and eventual execution. The presentation of Eleazar's death in 4 Maccabees also explicitly links Eleazar's own Noble Death with that of those who would follow his example.

⁸² For an extensive discussion, see van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs*, 85-124.

May we, the children of Abraham, never think so basely that out of cowardice we ...become a pattern of impiety to the young, in becoming an example of the eating of defiling food...and if we should be despised by the tyrant as unmanly, and not protect our divine law even to death. Therefore, O children of Abraham, die nobly for your religion! (4 Macc. 6.17-22)

In both 2 and 4 Maccabees, Eleazar's model of noble death for the ancestral laws is followed by seven brothers, tortured and eventually executed by the king. Each brother refuses to recant, preferring instead death over turning away from the laws of their fathers.⁸³ Through their endurance, the brothers win their struggle against the king.⁸⁴ Familiar Noble Death language was consciously and explicitly employed by Jewish authors from the author of 2 Maccabees to Josephus in recounting the stories of their heroes who had died for the fatherland and ancestral laws.

Christians also invoked Noble Death tradition. However, unlike the Jews, they had no 'fatherland' or homeland for which to fight. Much Noble Death tradition was set against the backdrop of warfare, and although Christians certainly employed the language of warfare, with no possibility of engaging in battle, this language was, at least initially, entirely spiritualised, making it inaccessible to pagan observers.⁸⁵ Ironically, Jewish revolts against Rome may have enhanced Roman appreciation of Jewish Noble Death tradition.

Christians did attempt to claim the tradition using language of the games, or invoke the Noble Death legacy. We have already seen Tertullian's attempts to persuade his readers that martyrdom compares well with the tradition. Elsewhere he goes further in suggesting Socrates anticipates Christian suffering for truth.⁸⁶ Furthermore, Christians also appropriated

⁸³ 2 Macc. 7.2, 5, 24, 30.

⁸⁴ Van Henten, *Maccabean Martyrs* 257-65; D. deSilva, *4 Maccabees* (SCS; Leiden; Brill, 2006), 244-56. Ni/kh is specifically employed for the martyrs' victory in 4 Macc.1.31; 6.30; 7.4; 8.2; 9.6, 30; 16.14; 17.25.

⁸⁵ '[Christians] never had an army or a homeland, and so no possibility for revolt ever existed. It was the same apocalyptic war tradition of the Jews, but for the Christian it was immediately spiritualized, universalized and transferred to the cosmic realm.' Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 133.

⁸⁶ Tertullian, *Ad Nationes* 1.4. He is, however, less enthusiastic about Socrates in *De Anima* 1. Celsus, of course, criticizes the comparison between Jesus and Socrates on account of Jesus' prevarication in Gethsemane. Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2.38-42.

the example of Socrates, arguing their martyrs equalled or surpassed the Greek hero. Justin claims the philosopher's mantle by arguing that the charges made against Christians were the same as those made against Socrates, that of introducing new gods.⁸⁷ Other martyr acts invoke the example of Socrates for apologetic purposes. In the *Martyrdom of Pionius*, the eponymous hero defends himself by invoking the memory of Socrates and other ancient heroes.

A bystander...who had a reputation for superiority in rhetoric, said to him:
'Cease, Pionius; do not be a fool!'

And Pionius answered him: 'Is this your rhetoric? Is this your literature? Even Socrates did not suffer thus from the Athenians. But now everyone is an Anytus and a Meletus. Were Socrates and Aristides and Anaxarchus and all the rest fools in your view because they practised philosophy and justice and courage?'⁸⁸

Pionius' rhetoric confounds his critics as he invokes the legacy of the ancient philosopher heroes. In the *Martyrdom of Apollonius*, the author compares the unjust treatment of Socrates with not only that suffered by Christians, but also Jesus

[Jesus] attained a great reputation for virtue. Still he was despised by the ignorant, like the philosophers and just men who lived before him. For the wicked have no use for the righteous...The Athenian informers convinced the people and then unjustly condemned Socrates; so too our Saviour and teacher was condemned by a few malefactors after they had him bound.⁸⁹

The prominence of Socrates in this text has led Dennis MacDonald to the conclusion that here, the death of the martyr is presented as 'an *imitation Socratis* as well as an *imitatio Christi*.'⁹⁰ Some Christians, such as John Chrysostom, went further, arguing that the deaths

⁸⁷ Justin, 2 *Apology* 10; see also 1 *Apology* 5. For discussion on the role of Socrates in Christian texts, see L. A. Greenberg, 'My Share of God's reward': *Exploring the Roles and Formulation of the Afterlife in Early Christian Martyrdom* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 43-70.

⁸⁸ *Martyrdom of Pionius* 17. Anytus and Meletus were prosecutors of Socrates.

⁸⁹ *Martyrdom of Apollonius* 38-39, 41.

⁹⁰ D. R. MacDonald, *Christianizing Homer: The Odyssey, Plato, and the Acts of Andrew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 252. The death of Socrates is explicitly referenced in many non-Christian texts, especially where there is some controversy over the cause. This is particularly true in deaths resulting in opposition to the Emperors, for example, Cato Uticensis in his opposition to Julius Caesar (Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 1.71-74). See especially, See K. Döring, *Exemplum Socratis: Studien zur Sokratensnachwirkung in der kynisch-stoischen Popularphilosophie der frühen Kaiserzeit und im frühen Christentum* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1979), 16-20.

of Christian martyrs were not only *like* Socrates, but that Christians' deaths surpassed that of the philosopher's.

But among them [the philosophers] also, it will be said, many have been found contemnors of death. Tell me who? was it he who drank the hemlock? But if you wish, I can bring forward ten thousand such from within the Church...And besides, he drank when he was not at liberty to drink or not to drink...But with us it is all quite the contrary. For not against their will did the martyrs endure, but of their will, and being at liberty not to suffer...This then you see is no great wonder, that he whom I was mentioning drank hemlock; it being no longer in his power not to drink, and also when he had arrived at a very great age. For when he despised life he stated himself to be seventy years old; if this can be called despising. For I for my part could not affirm it: nor, what is more, can anyone else. But show me some one enduring firm in torments for godliness' sake, as I show you ten thousand everywhere in the world. Who, while his nails were tearing out, nobly endured? Who, while his body joints were wrenching asunder? Who, while his body was cut in pieces, member by member? or his head? Who, while his bones were forced out by levers? Who, while placed without intermission upon frying-pans? Who, when thrown into a caldron? Show me these instances. For to die by hemlock is all as one with a man's continuing in a state of sleep. Nay even sweeter than sleep is this sort of death.⁹¹

In the first instance, Chrysostom points out that Socrates had no choice but to drink the hemlock, whereas the Christians go to their deaths of their own free will.⁹² Secondly, the violent manner of the deaths of the Christians requires more bravery since drinking hemlock is like falling asleep. Thirdly, Chrysostom claimed to be able to name ten thousand Christian martyrs for every Socrates. And fourthly, Socrates despised his life at a great age, whereas, by contrast, many Christians were being executed in the prime of their lives. It was, Chrysostom argued, a much greater thing for Christians to despise their lives. For Chrysostom, the paradigm of pagan death compares rather unfavourably with its Christian counterpart.

Pagan Criticism of Noble Death

⁹¹ John Chrysostom, *Homily IV on I Cor. 1.18-20*.

⁹² Droge and Tabor (*Noble Death*, 162 n.50) note that this is the first time Socrates' drinking of the hemlock is portrayed as being forced, rather than a voluntary act.

Christians, therefore, interpreted the deaths of their number in the tradition of Noble Death. Criminals were transformed into athletes, the executed became cosmic victors, and those who were thought to provoke their own deaths, were interpreted within the tradition of Socrates. Contemporary scholars have also identified connections between martyrdom and Noble Death.⁹³ In a recent essay, van Henten identified five similarities between the two phenomena: identity construction; patriotic death; defeating opponents; faithfulness to one's convictions; and beneficial death.⁹⁴ He draws connections especially with the Athenian tradition of funeral orations, where the dead are praised for faithfulness to ancestral laws and customs.⁹⁵ Yet, while Jewish death was at least in part accepted into the Graeco-Roman Noble Death tradition, pagans were simply unable to process Christian martyrdom. Despite the Christians' best efforts to portray their deaths as noble, the Romans simply could not recognise it.

So, Lucian, writing in the second century, says about the Christians:

The poor wretches have convinced themselves, first and foremost, that they are going to be immortal and live forever, in consequence of which they despise death *and even willingly give themselves over to arrest*.⁹⁶

Lucian notes that Christian belief about their post-mortem fate results in actions he finds somewhat bemusing. So confident are the Christians about their immortality that they are prepared to hand themselves over to arrest and execution.⁹⁷ Marcus Cornelius Fronto (c. 100–166) also notes the contrast between Christian belief about the present and future: 'They

⁹³ Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*; Williams, *Jesus' Death*;

⁹⁴ Van Henten, 'Noble Death', 86-89.

⁹⁵ For example, Thucydides 2.36, 41; Plato, *Men.* 237ab; Lysias, *Or.* 2.17; 23.24. Van Henten ('Noble Death, 87) also draws some important distinctions between the martyrdom of Jews and Christians and the Noble Death tradition: Religion as motivation; posthumous reward; testimony during trial, *imitation Christi*; and defeating the devil.

⁹⁶ Lucian, *Peregrinus* 13 (emphasis added).

⁹⁷ On the phenomenon of voluntary martyrdom, see the classic study by 'Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?' *Past and Present* 26 (1963), pp. 6–38; also Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*; C. Butterweck, *'Martyriumssucht' in der alten Kirche?: Studien zur Darstellung und Deutung frühchristlicher Martyrien* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1995); Middleton, 'Early Christian Voluntary Martyrdom: A Statement for the Defence.' *JTS* n.s. (2013).

despise torments...while they fear to die after death, they do not fear to die for the present: so does their deceitful hope soothe their fear with the solace of a revival.’⁹⁸ Interestingly, Marcus does not marvel at the ability of the Christians to withstand torture. The fact they are sustained by an unreasonable belief renders their endurance to be of little value. For these two writers, Christian beliefs about the afterlife resulted in a bizarre death wish. Therefore, whereas Seneca admired those who withstood torture, it seems that the cause of the torture was also a relevant factor in determining whether or not a death was noble. Epictetus found Christian desire for death to be madness.⁹⁹ According to Noble Death tradition, one had to establish that death was voluntary and not forced:

While it is praiseworthy to shorten your life when you still have years to look forward to, it is equally praiseworthy to shorten your life even by a moment-provided you summon death by your own hand.¹⁰⁰

However, it seems that Christians did this too well, and seemed to be *too* eager for death, so that it was regarded as habitual behaviour.¹⁰¹ In the minds of these pagan authors, Christians were so associated with a contempt for death, when they achieved it, it was dismissed as being unreflective, and therefore ignoble.¹⁰²

I have previously argued that these pagan criticisms of Christian enthusiasm for death corroborates the evidence in Christian texts which suggest provoked or ‘radical’ martyrdom was an early mainstream phenomenon in the early Church.¹⁰³ Whether or not one accepts this conclusion, the evidence suggests pagans did associate the Christians with a lust for death which went beyond the reflective nature of noble death. They also seem to be aware of

⁹⁸ Muncius Felix, *Octavius* 8-9. *Octavius* is a Christian apologetic work, set out as a dialogue between the Christian, Octavius, and the pagan Caecilius, on a journey from Roman to Ostia. Muncius acts as both narrator and arbitrator.

⁹⁹ Epictetus, *Discourses*, 4.7.1-6.

¹⁰⁰ Lucan, *Bellum Civile* 4.447-581. See Barton, ‘Savage Miracles’, 55-56 for discussion on the importance of establishing the voluntary nature of death.

¹⁰¹ Epictetus, *Discourses*, 4.7.6.

¹⁰² Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 20.

¹⁰³ Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 16-39; see also ‘Early Christian Voluntary Martyrdom’.

the attempt to link martyrdom with noble death tradition. Marcus Aurelius rejects the comparison, '[the willingness to die] should be deliberate, reasoned, and dignified, and if it is to convince anyone, should be free from theatre' ¹⁰⁴

Secondly, if there is any underlying unifying theme that characterises the Graeco-Roman understanding of what constitutes Noble Death, it is honour—either to gain or restore it. In stark contrast, the Christian mode of dying, spectacularly and in public was anathema to the concept of Noble Death. Paul's boast 'God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and men' (1 Cor. 4.9) would have horrified Marcus Aurelius. There could be no honour in following and dying for a man executed by the State. The word of the cross was folly, rather than noble in the eyes of the Romans. So for Justin, the critics of the Christians 'say that our madness consists in the fact that we put a crucified man in second place after the unchangeable and eternal God, the Creator of the world'.¹⁰⁵ As Hengel has shown, crucifixion was a death with no possible honourable spin in the Roman or Greek world.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, this is one of the arguments employed by Celsus against Christianity.¹⁰⁷ Dying for a crucified man, therefore, could bring no honour. Christians were already viewed with suspicion; on the surface, Christianity looked like a novel *collegium* or *hetaeria* of the sort forbidden by Trajan. Their secret rites provoked a suspicion they were guilty of superstition, which Romans thought could lead to atheism, magic rites, barbarism, and depravity.¹⁰⁸ We

¹⁰⁴ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 11.3.

¹⁰⁵ Justin, 1 *Apology* 13.

¹⁰⁶ M. Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (London: SCM Press, 1977).

¹⁰⁷ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.10.

¹⁰⁸ See for example Plutarch, *De Superstitione* 12.

have already seen general prejudice against the Christians reflected in both Pliny and Tacitus.¹⁰⁹

Furthermore, the form of Christian martyrdom helped exclude it from the general pattern of Noble Death. Generally, any means of death that violated the integrity of the body was considered base.¹¹⁰ Burning, the mode of death for several Christian martyrs, was considered especially exotic and looked upon with horror; for anything that mutilated the body was revulsion. So death by hanging and jumping were considered to be base forms of suicide for the same reason.¹¹¹ So, whereas Seneca kills himself with a single cut,¹¹² Ignatius' desired to be 'ground by the teeth of wild beasts, [and]...fire, and the cross...cutting and tearing apart, racking of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of my whole body.'¹¹³

The attempt to categorise Christian martyrdom as a subset of Noble Death was essentially an external concern. In order to persuade each other of the efficacy of martyrdom, the model laid down by Jesus was paradigmatic. Through suffering and martyrdom, Christians were perfected and gained life. This helps explain the relative enthusiastic embrace of death even if the pagans thought it madness. However, there was some concern in the presentation of martyrdom to emphasis the role of onlookers, either as characters in a narrative, or as those who had to be impressed by the manner of their deaths, possibly with conversion in mind. Martyrologies and apologies consciously drew on positive Graeco-Roman ideals, especially endurance, and also on Noble Death tradition. Despite there being a more or less fully functioning philosophy of death, even incorporating suicide, this Christian

¹⁰⁹ For discussion see Benko, 'Pagan Criticism of Christianity during the first Two Centuries.' *ANRW* II.23.2 (1980), 1055-1118; M. Smith, *Jesus the Magician: Charlatan or Son of God?* (California: Seastone, 1998), 66-70.

¹¹⁰ Van Hooff, *Autothanasia*, 51.

¹¹¹ Barton, 'Savage Miracles', 48. On the horror of breaching the integrity of the body, see C. P. Jones, 'Stigma: tattooing and branding in Graeco-Roman antiquity.' *JRS* 77 (1987), 139-55.

¹¹² Tacitus, *Annals* 15.60-63.

¹¹³ Ignatius, *Romans* 4.1-5.3.

attempt to define martyrdom as a subset of Noble Death was rather unsuccessful. Pagan writers simply did not register martyrdom as constituting the Noble Death. Rather unfairly, for the pagans Christian martyrdom was not Noble Death, but the actions of those who belonged to a Death Cult. Christians were dismissed as being overly enthusiastic for death such that their martyrdom was considered to be too unreflective, too spectacular, and too messy. Moreover, whereas in Noble Death tradition, death was the solution to shame, by following an executed criminal, leading to conviction for a variety of crimes, Christian death, as far as the pagans were concerned, was the cause of shame.