

Modern martyrs: Forgiveness and peace are the only way

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If, as Tertullian taught, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church, in a liberal society church growth has to find its inspiration elsewhere. Western society was built partly on the premise that people shouldn't have to suffer for their faith. That's why talk of martyrdom often seems exotic or irrelevant in churches in the U.S.

Yet in recent days a Christian martyr and a would-be martyr have been in the news. Tom Fox, an American who went to Iraq to witness for peace as a member of Christian Peacemaker Teams, was kidnapped and murdered there. In Afghanistan, Abdul Rahman faced the possibility of death at the hands of Muslims for having become a Christian (he was eventually given asylum in Italy).

As these cases make us think about martyrdom, they also reveal that martyrdom is not a simple matter. As a pacifist group, CPT is reluctant even to use the term *martyr* for Fox. CPT members are trying to disrupt cycles of violence, and they worry that talk about martyrdom can fuel the impulse for revenge and so lead to more violence.

Rahman's case is complicated by the fact that he sought martyrdom. He presented himself to Afghan authorities as a Christian and insisted, in the face of their reluctance to do anything, that they report him as a convert. Under Shari'a law conversion to Christianity merits death, even in the view of the moderate Afghani Muslims who opposed the Taliban regime.

Early church leaders warned Christians not to seek martyrdom. They argued that it is acceptable, even preferable, to escape to a neighboring town in order to avoid such a death. Only if one is cornered and required to renounce the faith should one accept martyrdom.

So seeking martyrdom can be a form of self-glorification, and declaring someone a martyr can be tantamount to calling for revenge—another form of violence. If we want to know the true meaning of martyrdom, we need to turn to the example of Jesus. In the face of death he asked for forgiveness for his executioners. And when he appeared to his disciples after the resurrection, he preached that his death was not an occasion for retribution but the basis for a community based on forgiveness.

As the CPT understands, a view of martyrdom informed by the Gospels is wary of the human tendency to identify self-righteously with the innocent victim and thereby ignore one's own impulse toward violence. It stresses that acts of forgiveness and peace offer the only way beyond the cycles of violence.