Salvation at Stake, by Brad S. Gregory

reviewed by Ellen L. Babinsky in the August 2, 2000 issue

Martyrdom appears so utterly alien to our time because postmodern theorists have reduced the truth claims of Western Christianity to private opinion, making any reference to ultimate truth unbelievable and certainly unverifiable. So asserts Brad S. Gregory in his impressive study of 16th-century martyrs and persecutors. Postmodern views, he declares, conclude that both the martyrs and their persecutors mistook for truth the necessarily tentative character of their cultural constructions. Gregory contends that such an approach will not help us understand the early modern Christians who were willing to kill and to die for religious belief. He wants to take martyrdom on its own terms because "the distinctiveness of religion demands methodological astuteness if we want to understand its practitioners, lest we misconstrue them from the outset. . . . Not to take such people on their own terms fails utterly to comprehend them, the character of their actions, and basis of their lives."

Confessional history puts up almost as many roadblocks to understanding as do the reductions of poststructuralist theory, Gregory argues. Therefore a "cross-confessional" study of martyrdom is warranted. Gregory hopes to encourage a "self-conscious neutrality" in the reader so that more than one perspective can be appropriated. He does not wish to relativize the competing faith claims, but "to let each resonate fully, creating a formal relativism of competing absolutisms." By this means he aims to make both martyrs and persecutors intelligible to the reader.

A startling outcome of Gregory's analysis of those willing to kill for religious belief is the assertion that the death of an "unrepentant, executed heretic marked a political defeat, not a victory." He is unwilling to dismiss the killing of heretics as "the ideological glove on the fist of political self-interest." Rulers, Gregory insists, understood themselves to be obligated to both God and their subjects to maintain true religion. Anabaptists, in contrast, viewed the notion of a "Christian government" as an oxymoron and understood their suffering at the hands of their persecutors as clear evidence that they were the true church which is persecuted and does not persecute.

Those willing to die for religious belief--Protestant, Anabaptist and Roman Catholic--shared the deep conviction that spiritual truth was worth dying for, because it was revealed by God in scripture. "Unlike prolonging one's life, fidelity to God was an absolute value. Otherwise scripture would not so often and so clearly have extolled it as the basis for a willingness to endure deprivation and even death."

As Gregory explores for each group "the ways that faith and the willingness to die were woven into the martyrs' lives," he shows that "they died for God's truth, but they disputed what his truth was. Their disagreements proved central to the formation of the three principal mutually exclusive martyrological traditions." Gregory then analyzes the texts of these traditions in order to assess how fellow believers understood their martyrs, and how news and portrayals were circulated after executions had taken place.

Early collections of Protestant martyr texts from the 1520s proliferated across national boundaries, blurring geographical particularity. The earliest executions fit into a ready-made interpretive framework inherited from the medieval template of the imitation of Christ, so that these early evangelicals were instantly celebrated as martyrs among their sympathizers in the Low Countries, in German or Swiss towns, and in England and France. Reformation publicists saw in the martyr's concreteness of belief a new way of being Christian, so that a peculiar Protestant identity was being forged in print as well as on the scaffold.

Reports of martyrdoms steeled resistance to persecution and were the source of encouragement to persevere. "Anti-Nicodemism," taking its name from the story of Nicodemus, who visited Jesus at night, "specifically condemned those who, in order to avoid persecution, engaged in Catholic practices despite harboring Protestant sympathies." As they persevered in their faith Reformed Protestants were comforted by a "confidence of genuine election." For Anabaptists, anti-Nicodemist views were clear and straightforward: "to ponder becoming an Anabaptist was ipso facto to think about martyrdom." Roman Catholic martyrs in the time of Henry, and later Elizabeth, were exhorted to uphold the authority of the papacy even under the threat of death for treason. Dissembling for the sake of safety was a peril to salvation, one Catholic writer declared.

Belief in particular doctrines was central both to martyrs and to their persecutors, and for both Roman Catholics and Protestants doctrinal beliefs were crucial in separating "true" martyrs from "false." Following Augustine, their martyr documents

declared that the cause makes the martyr, not the death. In contrast, Anabaptists never bothered with such distinctions because for them the true martyrs were those who never persecuted--namely, the Anabaptists themselves.

Conflicts arose on how doctrines were to be understood and interpreted. Martyrs and their persecutors both understood the risen Christ to be present to his followers in the Eucharist, but conflict surfaced over how Christ was present and what this presence meant. The embrace or denial of the doctrine of transubstantiation was the occasion for both killing and dying. All claimed baptism as a central element of their practice. Conflict came over the meaning of baptism, and over infant or adult baptism.

Thus, the content of belief overlapped, but the interpretations of belief were mutually exclusive. There was no common ground, no point at which agreement might have been reached. "The only way to persuade people that someone was a true martyr was to convince them that he or she had died as a true Christian--that is, to convert them. But Protestants, Anabaptists, and Roman Catholics alike grew up with the stories of their respective martyrs, men and women who had shed their blood for the truth. . . . As a result, collectively and over the long term, martyrdom militated against conversion and reinforced confessionalization."

Gregory weaves his analysis together so tightly that it is difficult to fathom what sort of conclusions might be drawn for our time. Resolving disputed points into "things indifferent" (adiaphora) solved nothing, for those involved in the contested areas of scripture and interpretation were not willing to have their beliefs reduced to something of indifferent consequence. To lift up religious toleration in the attempt to understand contrarily held conviction whitewashes the disagreements with "blatant anachronism." The irony is apparent when Gregory carefully notes that unresolved religious disagreement played a role in bringing about the Enlightenment, which has placed us in a context in which dying for religious belief seems unfathomable, perhaps even fanatical.

Nonetheless, I ponder the reports of courageous persons in explosive settings who seem willing to be in harm's way for a constellation of values larger than their particular lives. Would I, could I, ever imagine diminishing myself for the sake of the well-being of others? Is the laying down of one's life for others indeed so unfathomable? So fanatical?