

So of course it should, but the particular religious tradition is a false one, as I have already suggested of *New Christian*, if it contrasts the secular and the religious. The theological mistake lies in supposing that religion and God, like sore thumbs, have got to stick out. The two journals, in their own ways, each represent the best that can be made of a mediocre theological tradition. In this they differ from *New Blackfriars*, which theologically remains finely poised between the superb and the intolerable.

Jesus the Martyr

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Men and women martyred for their faith form a coherent and distinctive group—from Socrates and Stephen, through Joan of Arc, Savonarola and Thomas More, down to Dietrich Bonhoeffer in our own day. Violent death came to each in such a way that we can classify them all with Jesus.

Particular circumstances may allow us to match their martyrdoms with his passion and crucifixion. At times betrayal by former friends or similar forms of treachery led to arrest and imprisonment. The trials which preceded the death penalty frequently centred on some fatal question. Did Thomas More wish to deprive Henry VIII of the title which Parliament had granted him? How would Jesus answer when the high priest asked him: 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?' (Mark 14:61). Finally, many martyrs shared the same geography of death with Jesus—public execution. Some were, of course, butchered in their prison cells, or like Bonhoeffer led away to the sinister secrecy of a Nazi hanging. But Joan of Arc died in the Rouen market-place, Savonarola outside the old Palace in Florence, and Thomas More on Tower Hill.

Granted these and other similarities, we need, nevertheless, to be sensitive to much that gives Jesus' passion and death its own particular profile. The differences go beyond the obvious and massive fact that no one even alleges that the other martyrs have reconciled the entire human race with God. We must not let other notable contrasts slip out of sight. Let me examine one of these.

When set against the martyrdom of men like Socrates and Thomas More, Jesus' passion story lacks style. Plato's account of Socrates' trial and death arranges things, so that there are no cracks in the walls of his master's performance. Socrates appears like the patron saint of all high-souled intellectual liberals misunderstood and finally destroyed by menacing, know-nothing illiberals. With tranquil detachment he accepts the verdict of the Athenian court, refuses the opportunity to escape, spends his last hours debating the immortality of the soul, drinks the hemlock, and dies with peace and poise. Plato's art successfully anaesthetizes us against feeling either real anger or profound pain at the unjust sentence and the brutal extinction of the old philosopher. Socrates himself never weeps over Athens. He does not have to express deep distress at any betrayal by close friends. At the end he sends away his weeping wife and children. The disciples themselves stop weeping. The prison becomes transparent to eternal, universal realities, as Socrates speaks of the changeless world to which his soul will slip away without fear. Our attention shifts from the doomed man to a permanent, spiritual realm from which we came and to which we go. There are no ragged ends or rough edges in the martyrdom of Socrates.

Jesus, however, does not die with such style—particularly in the accounts offered by Mark and Matthew. In Gethsemane he suddenly becomes almost hysterical with terror and fear. He hungers for comfort from his friends and an escape from death, but finds neither. Finally, he checks his panic, gets control over himself and accepts his destiny. This struggle runs counter to the Platonic glorification of Socrates' calm. It prepares us to hear Jesus' cry as he writhes on the cross: 'My God, my God why has thou forsaken me?'

The martyrdom of Thomas More offers a contrast closer to our own times. In his trial this former Lord Chancellor conducted himself with a skill and integrity that made him forever the darling of the English bar. The case against More (that he had maliciously and traitorously rejected King Henry's title, 'Supreme Head of the Church') went badly, until Richard Rich gave evidence that More had uttered the fatal words in a conversation with him. In blazing terms More denied this evidence: 'If I were a man, my Lords, that did not regard an oath, I needed not, as it is well known, in this place, at this time, nor in this case, to stand here as an accused person. And if this oath of yours, Master Rich, be true, then pray I that I never see God in the face; which I would not say, were it otherwise, to win the whole world. . . . In good faith, Master Rich, I am sorrier for your perjury than for my own peril'.

It is hard to know whether to admire most either the martyr's lordly language and legal brilliance, or the gracious love and wit that flared up more than ever in his last days. Margaret Roper, his favourite

daughter, rushed through the guard to embrace her father, when he was returning to the Tower of London after sentence of death had been passed. On the eve of execution he wrote to her: 'Tomorrow long I go to God: it were a day very meet and convenient for me. I never liked your manner toward me better than when you kissed me last: for I love when daughterly love and dear charity hath no leisure to look to worldly courtesy. Farewell, my dear child, and pray for me, and I shall for you and all your friends, that we may merrily meet in Heaven'.

More saw the humourous side to martyrdom. Clambering up the rickety steps to the scaffold, he asked: 'I pray you, Master Lieutenant, see me safe up, and for my coming down let me shift for myself'. Before he knelt for execution, he made a brief speech, protesting that he died 'the King's good servant, but God's first'. R. W. Chambers calls these words 'the most weighty and the most haughty ever spoken on the scaffold. Dante could not have bettered them'.

All of this is high drama, both stylish and moving, but none of it fits Jesus' death. In silence he listened to the false witnesses disagreeing among themselves. It is almost too painful to imagine his mother pushing through the Roman soldiers to embrace her son, or to think of him scribbling a final letter to her: 'Mother, I never liked your manner toward me better than when you kissed me last'. We would hideously trivialise the dragging agony of crucifixion to fancy that Christ could have said at Calvary: 'I pray you, Master Centurion, see me safe up the cross, and for my coming down let me shift for myself'. Perhaps Dante could hardly have bettered More's final words, but Jesus could not have uttered them. A death by torture killing did not allow for a brief but poised speech of farewell. There could be no humorous or haughty side to crucifixion.

We may want to classify Jesus with Socrates, More and other martyrs. At the same time, however, we need to recognise how much sets him apart from them all—not least the belief that he saved the world through his death. Yet this cherished and central belief should not shut our eyes to the other differences.¹

¹I wish to acknowledge with gratitude some suggestions made by Rev. Michael Buckley SJ about the contrast between Jesus and Socrates. This contrast, of course, has been discussed—in various ways—by Cullmann, Guardini, Kierkegaard and others.