

Reviews

MARTYRDOM AND ROME, by Glen W. Bowersock. Cambridge University Press, 1995. Pp. xii + 106. £19.95.

The four chapters of this fascinating book began life as the *Wiles Lectures* given in Belfast in 1993. The slightness of the volume belies the richness of the material so deftly handled by Bowersock.

The first chapter seeks to explain the emergence of the concept of martyrdom in the second century. By this is meant not only dying for one's beliefs in defiance of authority, but the notion that such a person is a "witness", a *martus* or *marturos*. The origins of such a notion need explaining. The failure of Greek philosophy and pre-Christian Judaism to provide precedents for this use of the word *martus*, though there were plenty of what we would now call "martyrs" among their adherents, points towards a specifically Christian origin for it, possibly in Asia Minor in the second century. His discussion of the New Testament at this point is the least convincing part of Bowersock's book. He rejects Revelation 2:13 as a source for the concept of martyrdom: Antipas "was not a *martus* because he was slain, but a witness who was slain." He regards Acts 22:20 as a possible New Testament source for the concept: "When the blood of Stephen your martyr washed...", but even here there is doubt. Only five verses earlier Paul had referred to himself as a *martus*, with no suggestion of martyrdom involved. Bowersock concludes, however, that "this is the one passage in the entire New Testament that might have effectively encouraged the sense of martyrdom as it was to develop." [p. 15] But there are other occurrences of *martus* or its cognates which would have encouraged such a development. Revelation 17:6 shows the woman "drunk with the blood of the saints, and the blood of the martyrs (*marturon*) of Jesus." As in the case of Revelation 2:13 this may fail as evidence, because it is not clear whether these folk are "martyrs" because they were slain, or were slain because they were witnesses. Nevertheless, this kind of passage must have lent itself to the Christian appropriation of the term *martus*, as must Revelation 20:4: "I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony (*marturian*) to Jesus... and who had not worshipped the beast or its image..." Though neither of these demand the identification of "*marturia*" with suffering for the faith, they certainly lend themselves to it, and a cluster of such coincidences might well have inspired the later identification of "martyrdom" and bloodshed.

The second chapter examines the written record in the Acts of the Martyrs. Three sorts of contemporary literature are examined as the sources of these works: autobiographical material of the martyrs themselves, eye-witness accounts of their deaths, and official records of the judicial process. A good argument can be made that these strands

can be discerned woven into the fabric of the Acts, and that these are authentic records.

The following chapter examines the place of martyrdom in the life of the city and its dependence on such features of urban life as judicial procedures, intellectual culture, the role of the mob, the great festivals, the brothels, the imperial cult and other urban rituals. The characteristically Christian pattern of martyrdom, then, emerges in a way which is dependent on the distinctly non-Christian life of the cities where it appears.

The fourth chapter deals with the phenomenon of "voluntary martyrdom", which occasionally becomes actual suicide, and the efforts of the church to put a stop to it. Later sources played down this feature of the history of martyrdom, but we are presented with what appeared to contemporaries as a kind of collective insanity. It appears in much the same way to the modern reader, and one can only wish for a longer work from Bowersock in which the psychological, cultural and theological aspects of this movement might be explored, especially the subjective elements in the stories of people who queued up to die or threw themselves into fires. Something more of an explanation than "pathological desire" (p.7) would surely be illuminating. The four-lecture format of the present work allows only a brief glimpse of the Stoic background, the horror which the movement aroused, and the opposition of the views of Tertullian and those of Cyprian, Augustine and Clement. Augustine's "ringing denunciation of suicide" may also be related to his use of the "fear of death" motif in his dispute with Pelagius. Robert Dodaro has shown how he attributes a "lingering mortal fear" to the dying apostles and martyrs, a sign of the incompleteness of the healing process, the continuing failure of humanity even after baptism, and the need for grace at the moment of death - even among the saints.

Four short appendices expand usefully on some of the themes in the corpus of the book. The whole is a pleasure to read - one of those rich seams that can be mined more than once. Shedding its light on "the dark space between the Gospels and hagiography", it shows the historical emergence of a concept which proved one of the most powerful in the Christian imagination - and not only for the understanding of violent death - from Athanasius' description of Anthony's life as a "daily martyrdom", echoed by Martin's hagiographer Sulpicius Severus and by the "white martyrdom" of Irish monastic asceticism, right up to the modern day. A pleasure to read, but a disturbing one.

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DOM COLUMBA MARMION: A BIOGRAPHY by Mark Tierney OSB.
Columba Press. 1994. £11.99

Anyone who like me is a constant trawler of secondhand bookshops knows that the works of Abbot Marmion are to be found there in abundance, all with the bookplates of convents and seminaries up and