

BOOK REVIEWS

Matthew D. Lundberg, *Christian Martyrdom and Christian Violence***(Oxford: OUP, 2021), pp. xii + 281. \$99.00**

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In this work, Matthew Lundberg argues for the expansion of the recognition of Christian martyrdom to include those who die while wielding the sword. On one hand, his argument is straightforward and of a piece with contemporary efforts to expand the understanding and recognition of martyrdom beyond that narrowly circumscribed by a death on account of one's Christian identity to include a death precipitated by Christian actions against injustice and so forth. Oscar Romero and Dietrich Bonhoeffer are the examples that do the most work in this text.

On the other hand, certain difficulties attend this particular expansion, involving as it does identifying as a martyr one who dies in the course of inflicting violence and suffering on others. The difficulty is born of what Lundberg calls the paradox of the mainline or magisterial church's honouring those who die by the sword as martyrs while simultaneously giving a 'tenuous blessing' to those who wield the sword. Of course, the peace church traditions would argue that the 'paradox' is more accurately named a contradiction.

Instead of dismissing this objection, Lundberg engages it, although not with the point of refuting Christian pacifists. Were he attempting to refute pacifists, this would be the least successful part of his work, for his arguments regarding the teaching and example of Jesus as well as the 'imitation of Christ' ethic that undergirds his reading of pacifism are either unconvincing (he admits the difficulty of finding a warrant for disciples' use of violence in Jesus' words and example, settling for bringing violence 'in the neighborhood' of Jesus' words) or (in the case of the critique of imitation) miss the mark to the extent that it is a straw figure – the Christian pacifisms of the likes of Yoder, Hays and Hauerwas are not founded on imitation as identical repetition with its attendant problems. (Whether such a description accurately describes the moral-spiritual tradition of *imitatio Christi*, or is even possible, are questions that exceed the parameters of this review.)

This does not undermine his argument because Lundberg is not trying to *prove* that violence is faithful. Rather, like a skilled defence attorney he aims to sow doubt about the pacifist position so he can declare different conclusions are 'plausible' (p. 120), that both pacifism and violence involve an interpretive and spiritual gamble. In other words, his goal is assuring non-pacifists *they* are *not* obviously wrong, that violence and violent martyrs are plausible. Having uncovered this possibility, Lundberg devotes the remainder of the work to what is his most interesting move, namely, considering how martyrdom itself should shape Christian use of violence.

In particular, Lundberg engages the just war tradition as the paradigmatic instance of Christian sword wielding and argues that martyrdom should inform Christian engagement in just war precisely in the Christian's willingness to abide by the proscriptions of that tradition, even when doing so risks dying. This carries over to Christians called to wield the sword in public safety and criminal justice in that they should be similarly restrained and willing to die.

The second facet of martyrdom's influence on Christian sword wielding concerns the Christian realism associated with Augustine, the Niebuhrs and especially Bonhoeffer, to which Lundberg turns to underwrite his vision. Such realism holds that violence is a lesser evil that is sometimes regrettably necessary in service of relative goods in a world where sin persists as we await eschatological redemption. Moreover, this realism recognises that no rules, principles or norms, even the exhortations of Jesus, are absolutely binding; in the face of great evil and the ambiguities of human frailty and sin, norms may need to be violated. In this regard, Lundberg embraces Michael Walzer's 'supreme emergency' rationale as justification for violating the just war ethic.

Yet Lundberg is wary of the pull of the cynical realism (think Hobbes and Machiavelli) that would wield the sword too readily and too harshly, facily discarding norms in the name of 'necessity'. Here the martyr's fidelity prompts Lundberg to describe his as a 'principled realism' (pp. 172 and *passim*).

This is a rich argument with many moving parts, with only the highlights being touched upon here. While the argument for the expansion of the understanding of martyrdom to include those who wield the sword makes sense, given Lundberg's presuppositions and the 'paradox' of the mainline/magisterial church, the use of realism muddies and even appears to undercut the argument in two ways.

First (and by the author's own *de facto* admission), realism cannot draw lines that realism cannot undercut. Lundberg stresses that principles, even Jesus's teaching, are not absolutely binding, and his embracing of Walzer's supreme emergency clouds both the 'principled' part of his realism and his advocacy for a rigorous just war theory. More pointedly, we might ask how on realist grounds Lundberg evades the arguments used against pacifism being turned against his own efforts to restrain violence. Why, for example, on realist grounds, let moral purity stand in the way of saving others? Why, on realist grounds, limit violations to a *supreme* emergency?

Second, as Lundberg recognises, realism and just war theory built on a realist foundation are about lesser evils. Lundberg even refers to Christian violence as a 'metaphysical crime'. And as Bonhoeffer, Walzer and Lundberg insist, violating what is right incurs guilt, not honour. Which suggests that, by the logic of Lundberg's own argument just warriors cannot be martyrs. They are not signs of faithfulness but persons who take on guilt (personal and vicarious) in the hope of future forgiveness. At best they might earn Bonhoeffer's appellation of 'guilty martyrdom', if that is even coherent.

In the end, perhaps what is needed is more Augustine and less Niebuhr/Bonhoeffer: developing Augustine's understanding of killing that is not a lesser evil but an alien act of love, where temporal death graciously forestalls eternal punishment. Such sword wielding, adhering to a rigorous just war ethic, is not inherently guilty but an act of faith, which, following Lundberg's master argument, renders such sword-bearers potential martyrs.

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