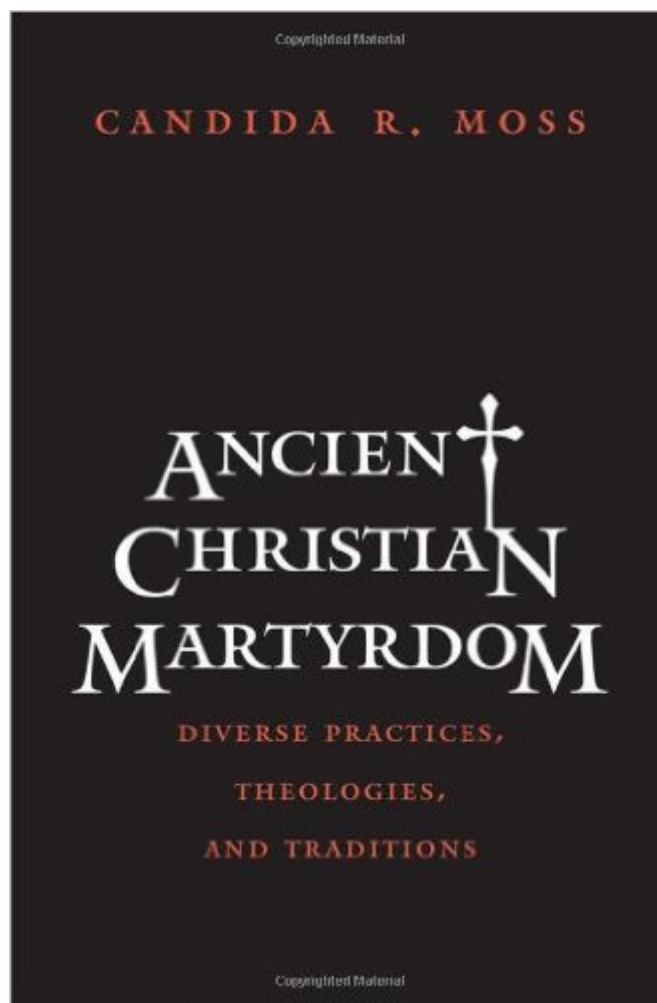


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Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, And Traditions (The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library)



Synopsis

The importance of martyrdom for the spread of Christianity in the first centuries of the Common Era is a question of enduring interest. In this innovative new study, Candida Moss offers a radically new history of martyrdom in the first and second centuries that challenges traditional understandings of the spread of Christianity and rethinks the nature of Christian martyrdom itself. Martyrdom, Moss shows, was not a single idea, theology, or practice: there were diverse perspectives and understandings of what it meant to die for Christ. Beginning with an overview of ancient Greek, Roman, and Jewish ideas about death, Moss demonstrates that there were many cultural contexts within which early Christian views of martyrdom were very much at home. She then shows how distinctive and diverging theologies of martyrdom emerged in different ancient congregations. In the process she reexamines the authenticity of early Christian stories about martyrs and calls into question the dominant scholarly narrative about the spread of martyrdom in the ancient world.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Candida R. Moss' most recent monograph is an astonishingly impressive, extraordinarily necessary, and genuinely enjoyable contribution to scholarship on early Christianity. With hermeneutical savvy and considerable aplomb, she shepherds the reader through decades of (often) dull and divisive scholarship to diagnose where the field strayed and to tread a new, more promising path forward. As she astutely acknowledges in her introduction: "In the study of ancient Christianity, no figure polarizes the scholarly world as effectively as the martyr. Study of the martyrs is as often a

disdainful preoccupation as it is a preoccupying delight. The martyr commands attention, fascinates the skeptic, and confounds the rationalist" (1). As our modern sensibilities do not see being fed to a lion an exciting Friday night, it's easy to psychologize the mental instability of the martyrs and dismiss them as needlessly suicidal. Or, confessional investment claims the martyrs as the precious progenitors of Christianity and leads to unquestioned acceptance of these accounts as journalistic pericope. In many ways, the goal of Moss' text is to demonstrate the failure of such approaches to fully appreciate the complexities and sophistication of these ancient accounts. Through her tremendous scholarship she pays witness to the dynamic/devastating discourses of martyrdom and their intricate incorporation (and interpretation) of diverse contextual traditions about death, suffering, and hegemony. As she describes: "This book treats martyrdom as a set of discursive practices that shaped early Christian identities, mediated ecclesiastical and dogmatic claims, and provided meaning to the experience described by early Christians as persecution, and in doing so produced a new economy of action. This account, therefore, is less about what makes or does not make a martyr in some ontological sense than about how martyrs are created and for what purposes" (17). The subsequent chapters of the book yield refreshing re-readings of several martyrdom accounts with an eye for their latent complexities and an exposure of misguided academic assumptions. It is especially worth noting that Moss' prose is pregnant with fantastic wit and eloquence, making this text a treat to read. As a graduate student, I can testify to the tragic paucity of such a gift in many manuscripts--I assure you, some texts can be a minor form of mental martyrdom. Now in terms of audience, I would recommend readers to have some background in the field, if only to appreciate what an accomplishment this text is. (My only complaint is more of a personal peeve with the publisher as I would point out how unhelpful endnotes are) But my unreserved recommendation is to buy this text, make your students buy this text, give it as gifts and keep an eye open for Candida Moss' next bestseller.

Modern histories of martyrdom have tended to take one of two approaches: 1) they attempt to reconstruct the history of martyrdom genealogically, tracing it from its modern definition backward into antiquity in an attempt to find the origin of the idea and practice; 2) they attempt to explain the existence of martyrdom in spite of the seeming irrationality of the act, flying in the face of the assumption that human beings naturally seek a long, healthy life, and will generally do anything to avoid death. In her book, Candida Moss questions and problematizes both of these approaches, arguing that they both rely on the presupposition of a single, monolithic notion of martyrdom that can be tracked back to a single origin. She argues that attempts to reconstruct the linguistic evolution of

the term *martyr* have been weighted too heavily, and give a false sense of uniformity of thought on the practice. On the contrary, the idea of martyrdom is not synonymous with any specific linguistic term. Furthermore, identification of the origin of martyrdom with the birth of the linguistic term privileges Christianity, and assumes martyrs could not have existed before the existence of the term for martyr--this would exclude classic examples such as the Maccabees, Daniel, and Socrates....read the whole review at ryanwesleyweber.wordpress.com...This book makes significant contributions to our understanding of early Christian thought about martyrdom. Far from the homogenous ideological history that many scholars have attempted to narrate, Moss demonstrates conclusively that there existed a wide variety of practices and beliefs surrounding martyrdom in antiquity, which varied from region to region and even from one text to another.

The book is a predecessor to her more popular "Myth of Persecution" The book is very compelling in looking at Martyrdom through out the Roman Empire. It's also a university press so there's a lot detail in examining the original texts.

As a sane reviewer (as opposed to, say, a crazy person who hasn't read the book), it is a pleasure to recommend this work. It is perhaps the single most important recent work on ancient Christian martyrdom, a tour de force of historical and philological expertise, which illuminates in great detail the various diverse manifestations of early Christian ideas about living and dying for faith. For anyone interested in the complicated origins of Christianity, or the many ways Christian belief was expressed in its scattered locales, this book is both a fund of information and an aesthetic joy to read.

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