The Blood of Martyrs: An Exploration of the Power of Conversion through Blood in the First through Fourth Centuries.

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Thesis Prospectus
“The Blood of the martyr is the Seed of the Church”

–Tertullian, 3rd Century Christian Apologist

Christianity in the Roman Empire was not what it is today. Today Christians enjoy a world-wide presence and dominate every facet of society. However, in the Roman Empire, Christians were nothing more than a small group of individuals, hunted and persecuted for their beliefs. The story of how this small sect of “Jesus Worshippers” attained dominance in the Roman Empire, although there were attempts at eradication, is one of blood. Within the blood that the victims shed, Christians and pagans alike found inspiration. Martyrdom became something to aspire to, and the rewards, very much worth the sacrifices that were made.

Indeed, this idea dominated the minds of many Christians as they were put to death at the hands of Roman officials during the first through fourth centuries A.D. The reward that they sought was martyrdom, a term that developed a particular connotation to parallel the faith of the dying and the suffering that they endured. Martyrdom was something that believers sought with zealousness. They believed that by suffering for Christianity, they were gaining a place in Christ’s heavenly kingdom. In battling against the evil Roman Empire they were doing God’s work on earth.¹ An account from the second century recorded by the Christian

¹ As referenced in Joyce E. Salisbury’s The Blood of Martyrs’ discussion of Good vs. Evil, in which the Roman Empire is portrayed as the Devils device on Earth and the Martyrs as fighting against the evil. Martyrdom became sacrifice that they were willing to make in order to combat that which would challenge their faith.
apologist Tertullian, describes the reaction of a Roman provincial governor to the fervent desire of Christians to be put to death in their fanatical longing for martyrdom:

> Your cruelty is our glory. Only see you to it, that in having such things as these to endure, we do not feel ourselves constrained to rush forth to the combat, if only to prove that we have no dread of them, but on the contrary, even invite their infliction. When Arrius Antoninus was driving things hard in Asia, the whole Christians of the province, in one united band, presented themselves before his judgment-seat; on which, ordering a few to be led forth to execution, he said to the rest, ‘O miserable men, if you wish to die, you have precipices or halters.’

Clearly, Arrius Antoninus, the governor, knew the consequences behind the mob’s appearance at his doorstep: they all wanted to be put to death in order to suffer the glorious death in the name Christianity.

It is from this supposition on part of the contemporaries that I will begin my investigation into the consequences of martyrdom on contemporary Roman society. While there have been many discourses on the modern-day implications of martyrdom, many controversies still surround it. Particularly, historians in the field have offered only scant examinations of the consequences from the Roman Empire’s actions on the growth of the sect of Christianity within its own time. It will thus be my aim to explore the overall impact that the sight of the obstinacy in the face of unimaginable tortures displayed by the persecuted had on the spectators that frequented such events. My investigation will aim to answer these questions: To what extent did the spectacular deaths of Christian leaders – bishops, deacons, and apologists– lead to the undoing of the Roman Empire’s goal to eradicate the

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2 Tertullian, *Ad Scapula*, Ch. 5  
3 *Epistles of Pliny to Emperor Trajan*
Christian sect? Christianity and the Roman Empire are intertwined because, arguably, were it not for the Roman Empire’s policy of pursuing a systematic eradication of the Christians within its cities, Christianity would have been nothing more than a mere sect among thousands, waddling its way through history. This also begs the question: did the policies of Roman Emperors and provincial governors contribute to the exponential growth of Christianity? Whilst this might seem a straightforward yes or no question, in my view, the realization among emperors themselves that their policy of “throw them to the wolves” (or in this case lions and bears), may not have been the wisest, suggests that the answer is much more complex. Christians believed that they were destined to overcome the challenges they faced and establish a holy kingdom - this they considered to be God’s Will. As G.W. Bowersock states: “God’s Will could actually have been subverted, had the Romans chosen to allow the Christians not to practice idolatry”\(^4\) or to worship Christ as they wanted.

In order to answer these questions and illuminate the effects of the deaths of religious leaders on the masses, I propose to separate this thesis into two distinct sections. The first will explore the martyrdoms themselves: this will include the memory, recollections and transcriptions of Christian leaders’ martyrdoms. Also, the martyr’s life and background will be used to paint a full picture of the individuals that Christianity attracted and welcomed to its fold. Christianity, in its

nascent period, according to Celsus,\(^5\) attracted the lowest of the low-thieves, murderers, rapists, and the uneducated.\(^6\) Celsus provides vivid imagery of how Christians were viewed by him and his contemporaries: “frogs squatting around a marsh’ discussing who was the most sinful among them.”\(^7\) Many other pagans and enemies of Christians shared similar notions.

By examining these notions, a clear composition of the church from the bottom-up can be garnered and analyzed to distinguish the masses of believers from the leaders. Among these leaders, St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Ignatius (Bishop of Antioch); St. Polycarp (Bishop of Smyrna); St. Cyprian (Bishop of Carthage); St. Clement (Bishop of Rome); Pothinus (Bishop of Lyons); St. Justin (second century apologist); and Iraneaeus (Bishop of Sirimium) will be of primary focus, due to the length and popularity of the narratives that have been made available for our purposes. To end this section, I will contrast the narratives of these heads of church with those of the followers: the martyrdom of the masses themselves varied from the experiences of the leaders, a theme that must be explored in order to gauge the effect of persecuting in a top-down approach, which the Roman Empire attempted. Here, I will utilize the *Acta Martyrum* of those who were not leaders but commoners who heard the calling of the faith: St. Perpetua and her companion Felicity; Blandina; and St. Felicitias of Rome.\(^9\) A chorological study of these martyrdoms, in

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5 Celsus was a learned 2nd century opponent of Christianity who began an attack against the Christians by denouncing them in his writings. Much of his words are lost, however, his attacks have been preserved in the rebuttal of Origin, a Christian apologist, in his *Contra Celsus*.
6 Bainton, 102.
7 Origen *Celsus* IV.23.
8 *The Letters of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons*, A.D. 177
which those of leaders are intertwined with those of common believers, will provide a glimpse into the changes in the ways the Roman Empire persecuted the Christian criminals and also provide insight into the changes of the narratives themselves.

Part two of this thesis will then change pace and delve into the dirt and grit of the period: the social standing of Christians, Roman society’s view of Christians (and how this led to their hatred and disgust of them), and the effects of deaths on congregations and the church as a whole through an examination of the growth and proliferation of believers. This will be accomplished through historical analyses of past and present historians in reference to their examination of the social implications of the deaths (or murders) of Christian leaders. The effect of those deaths on believers during the first through fourth centuries will be a focus in this section due to the primary source writings from contemporaries that convey the dominant emotions within Christian communities. Also, of particular importance for me in this section will be to illuminate the language from the accounts that served as the inspiration for new and extensive conversions: while viewing the act of the martyrdom was powerful in and of itself in creating converts, the subsequent usage of these recollections by missionaries and preachers to incite mass conversions and expand their ranks was, I’d like to argue, much more effective.

As Section I of this book will begin with a discussion of the Martyrdoms, I will draw a great deal from the primary sources to illuminate my thesis. These come in the form of, as G.W. Bowersock outlines, documentary sources composed of
writings from the martyrs themselves, eyewitness accounts of sympathetic onlookers (at the event of the martyrdoms) and official transcripts from the Roman interrogators. Bowersock makes clear, however, that the martyrologies compiled by the church were undoubtedly altered to reflect the church and martyrs in a more appealing light, to attract converts and inspire pious believers in their faith\textsuperscript{10}. I will also point to this and by using various translations, illuminate the changes in the narratives over time. These changes occurred as the church saw the need. The utilization of martyrologies not only attracted followers, but also served as a cementing tool, recollecting a shared past of discrimination. Whenever it served their purpose, preachers could illuminate and change certain aspects within narratives to better inspire their congregations.

Then I will dive into the primary sources, supplanted with commentary from modern scholars as pertinent, recapping and recollecting the past through narratives of martyrs. As mentioned, this will include the leaders of the church and their followers. Among these leaders, the more famous Polycarp of Symarna, a man in his mid-eighties, faced his persecutors c. 170 CE\textsuperscript{11} with stern determination and divinely inspired willpower. In one recollection a crowd of onlookers comment on his role in the Christian community: “This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians.”\textsuperscript{12} The fact that even the Roman masses recognized him in such an esteemed role (as father and teacher), speaks to the status he held. This language,

\textsuperscript{10} Bowersock, 27.
\textsuperscript{11} The date of Polycarp’s martyrdom is debated. Some historians opt for the earlier date of 155 AD but, most agree that it was under the reign of Marcus Aurelius (166-170) that he faced persecution.
\textsuperscript{12} The Martyrdom of Polycarp in Bettenson.
as G.W. Bowersock points out, likens him to Jesus Christ, the teacher and father of Christians. By doing this, a picture is created of Polycarp as a father and teacher to the Christians and someone worthy of “veneration”\(^\text{13}\) as is done with the bestowal of sainthood upon him. This is not unique. It is but one example of cohesiveness within the Christian community. Such accounts served to create parishes\(^\text{14}\), where Christians would honor those who made the greatest sacrifice (their life). It is also one of the many examples of the status that church leaders held in their congregations. Such language will continuously be referred as I attempt to highlight the other Actas to prove my thesis.

Both Henry Bettenson in *Documents of the Christian Church*\(^\text{15}\) and Herbert Musurillo in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*\(^\text{16}\) have compiled and translated collections of primary sources relating to this subject. They provide us with some of the primary documents that I intend to utilize for the memory section of my thesis. Musurillo’s collection provides us with original documents in their original language side-by-side with the English language translation: this is principally useful because I will be able to see where and if the translator has made any mistakes in their translation. Particularly I will utilize “The Martyrdom of Polycarp”, “The Acts of Justin and Companions”, “The Letters of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne”, “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas”, “The Act of Cyprian”, and “The Martyrdom of Iraneaeus Bishop of Sirimium” from the compilation of Musurillo.

\(^{13}\) Bowersock, 44.

\(^{14}\) Christian communities, dedicated to particular saints and holy persons within Christianity.


From Bettenson’s collection, I will use “Tertullian on Persecution”, “Christian Loyalty to the Emperor”, “The Martyrdom of SS. Peter and Paul”, “Martyrdom of Polycarp”, “Persecution at Lyons and Vienne”, “Persecutions under Decius”, and “Persecution under Diocletian”.

These primary sources have been examined by many before me, but few have chosen to highlight the spiritual and community-building effect that the language and visions of these acts might have had on those viewing, reading or hearing them. For the history of the early martyrs, I will rely on Eusebius’ History of the Church from Christ to Constantine. Eusebius wrote during the reign of Emperor Constantine and became Bishop of Caesarea in 313, living through both the best and the worst of times in the development of Christianity. By the time he became bishop in a Christian empire and enjoyed the relative peace that this offered, Eusebius witnessed the greatest of the persecution years under the Roman Emperor Diocletian (284-304). This work compiles lists and histories that are particularly important to my study from the beginning of Christianity to the end of persecutions under Emperor Constantine in 313 A.D. Many modern historians of Martyrdom and Persecution agree that this is one of the most valuable sources that must be referenced when exploring this area of history.

The collection of Ante-Nicene Fathers in translation will be consulted throughout because it is one of the major complete collections of Martyrologies and Christian writings from the period in question. As the name suggests it is a collection of Christianity pre- Council of Nicaea (325), at which point Christianity
had become the dominant religion of the Empire. This collection is a late nineteenth
century translation of a majority of Early Christian writings and thus may be
slightly dated, but useful nonetheless.

In addition to employing the available primary sources for this section, I will
look to modern historians for their perspectives on the events that occurred and
their treatment of these specific Christian leaders. This will include biographies
that examine persecutions and martyrdoms. Few biographies have been written
about the individuals I wish to study, but short studies in the form of journal
articles are more readily available. The few thorough biographies that have been
produced are out of print, and almost impossible to acquire. Thus, I will utilize
journal articles concerning the lives of the above mentioned martyrs in this
endeavor.

*Perpetua’s Passion* by Joyce Salisbury\(^{17}\) will be very useful for this section.
Zooming in on the passion and martyrdom of a young roman mother, Salisbury
examines the diary of one of Christianity’s first female writers. The sources acclaim
her martyrdom as spectacular. Salisbury examines the notions of female
empowerment, dreams and sacrifice in Rome that are evident in the life of
Perpetua. In her diary, Perpetua vividly describes four dreams, or visions, that she
receives from god. There are many lessons that can be culled from Perpetua’s
martyrdom, but Salisbury points to the uses of her recollection by church leaders in
the centuries following her death. Namely, the way in which the church used her

intimacy with god, exemplified by her receipt of four visions, to strike fear and shame in the hearts of less pious Christians. This in turn inspired piety in beliefs and dedication to Christianity.

Section II of this thesis will deal with the response of Christians (primarily) and Romans (to a lesser extent) to the martyrdoms discussed in Section I in an attempt to highlight emotions in the narratives. This will include the social implications of martyrdom, as well as its consequences for the church. Many primary sources are available for this purpose, but with the limited scope of this thesis, they will be combed for those that more effectively match my purpose. This, however, does not indicate an impartial reading of the sources, for I will certainly make reference to sources that may or may not contradict my argument.

It has been suggested by G.W. Bowersock, W.H.C. Frend, and Joyce. E. Salisbury and many primary sources that the martyrdoms were, to some degree, the result of pious Christians voluntarily throwing themselves on fires meant for others, or at the feet of persecutors, in hopes that they’d be put to death in order to achieve the gifts of martyrdom. These sorts of events seem to be more than common. They tend to occur in connection with the persecution of church leaders: many followers would gather and beg to face persecution with their leaders and to follow the leaders into the afterlife. According to Bowersock, such behavior should be considered suicide (as we understand voluntary death), which itself had its roots within Judaism and the Roman culture, providing a stage for the effectiveness of these “mass martyrdoms”. Rome in fact, glorified suicide, more so than the Greeks.

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or Jews. Here, Bowersock declares: “Without the glorification of suicide in the Roman tradition, the development of martyrdom in the second and third centuries would have been unthinkable.”19 In her discussion regarding the subject, Joyce E. Salisbury shows us that even among Christian leaders, particularly Clement and Tertullian, the principles of martyrdom (and suicide) were strongly debated: while Tertullian celebrated it as something Christians should aim for, Clement denounced it strongly and says that Christians should seek to do God’s work here on earth and not by killing themselves.”20 We must however keep in mind that the term suicide did not exist during this period and is a modern notion imposed on the behavior of those individuals. In A Noble Death, Droge and Taylor examine the development of suicide as something deplorable and sinful within the church. Droge and Taylor argue that it was not until St. Augustine in the late fourth century, that “self-death” was condemned and shunned. This practice nevertheless achieved wonders in the way of church growth, and by the time it was condemned, it had already helped establish the condemning institutions’ role and power in the world.

The fact that the Roman Empire brought Christians from the fringes of the empire to urban cities of the day (Carthage and Rome, primarily) to be persecuted is pointed to in G.W. Bowersock’s Martyrdom and Rome. He states that, “from the Christian point of view, martyrdom in a city provided the greatest possible visibility for the cause of the nascent Church, and it simultaneously exposed the Roman

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19 Bowersock, 72.
administrative machinery to the greatest possible embarrassment.” Here, he suggests that Christians actively and openly sought arrest and persecution. This claim is supported in many instances by modern scholars and primary sources. Salisbury argues the same in her statement: “studies of martyrs indicate that more people were martyred because they volunteered than because they were arrested.” The notion that Christians actively sought martyrdom, as implied by these two authors, is very important to my thesis: Church leaders going eagerly to their deaths, viewed by their Christian followers, became a model for Christians, much like the persecution of Jesus Christ. The converse becomes apparent from this perception: persons viewing the resolute fortitude in the face of persecution on part of the martyrs may have wondered what it was that made these individuals face their death with such zeal. Consequently, these onlookers may also be led to Christianity through their curiosity.

Salisbury’s and Frend’s discussions of the Roman Empire’s relation to Christians vary greatly but are integral to this section of my discussion. Frend stresses the social and religious threat that Christianity as a new religion posed to the status-quo of the empire. This threat permeated the important cult of the emperor and even the family structure, which was disrupted as families broke apart when one member chose Christ over the empire cults. Frend offers an explanation for why Romans specifically targeted the Christian sect for persecution. Frend argues that Christians, by breaking away one or two converts from Roman families,

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21 Bowersock, 42.
22 Salisbury, 194.
disrupted the social structure, something very important to Romans and the Roman religion.\textsuperscript{23}

Salisbury uses the motif of good vs. evil found in the \textit{Book of Revelations}, revealed to Christians through John’s visions at the end of the first century, to foretell the coming of the apocalypse, which in this case is indicated by the persecutions that were to visit the Christian communities. According to Salisbury, evil in the \textit{Book of Revelations} was represented by the Roman Empire, which Christians were fiercely fighting against through their martyrdoms as representatives of good.\textsuperscript{24} Bowersock alternatively portrays the Roman Empire as the impetus for the exponential growth of Christianity by providing the stage upon which Christians became the performers.\textsuperscript{25} Through this method of persecution, Roman officials failed miserably in achieving their aim of eradicating the Christian sect. They conversely allowed it to grow in size and importance in Roman Society.

Because the persecutions occurred as public spectacles in urban cities with large populations, many were ‘witness’ to the savagery of the Romans and the steadfast devotion of the Christians: this no doubt, would at the least intrigue onlookers to inquire as to the reason why these men are women would endure such tortures for a religious belief.

The primary sources available for this section are tremendous. This is particularly because the attacks against Christians were twofold: while they took on a brutal physical form, they were also waged in the literate sphere by learned and

\textsuperscript{23} Frend, 194.  
\textsuperscript{24} Salisbury, 10-12.  
\textsuperscript{25} Bowersock, 50-56.
educated men. It is to these men that many Christian doctrines and beliefs have been attributed. They are considered the “Fathers of the Church,” a title acquired both by establishing doctrinal beliefs through their writings and the defense of Christianity against pagan attackers and through their self-sacrifice in martyrdom. Although Christian writers during the first through fourth centuries were few, Christianity gained its defense in the centuries following Constantine’s conversion. Christians may have suffered dramatically under pagan emperors but after they gained power under Constantine, Christians became the makers of history and it is from their words that historians must attempt to cull the true events of the period.

In *Terullian*, Timothy David Barnes attempts to illustrate the life and world of, arguably, one of the Church’s greatest apologist, Tertullian. Tertullian became what modern historians would consider the Church’s press agent, but has also been called a propagandist. Barnes study of this prolific figure is rather weak in many instances but serves the purpose of this study. Most important is his presentation of Tertullian through his literary works and philosophical background, providing a strong ground upon which I will draw to analyze the language in his work as propaganda eliciting the conversion of many pagans and gentiles to Christianity. Tertullian’s primary works will be analyzed in order to garner the sentiments of the Christian population. These will include “Ad martyras,” “De fuga in persecutione,” “De spectaculis,” and his larger works “Apologeticum,” “Ad Scapulam,” and “Adversus Marcionem.”
Through analysis of a remarkable amount of primary sources and a relatively large amount of secondary sources on the topic of martyrdom and persecution during the first four centuries, I intend to answer the questions that I have posed. This thesis will show that the martyrdom of influential church leaders served many purposes. I will reference the solidifying effect martyrs had on congregations of believers who rallied around the martyrs’ remains as a chosen of God. Also, I will illustrate the way in which these martyrs helped to attract more converts to Christianity, thus swelling the number of believers. I will also illustrate the consequences that resulted from the actions of the Roman Empire; specifically, their role in aiding the expansion of Christianity through persecution.
“The Christian Martyr’s Last Prayer” by Jean-Leon Gerome (1883): as the lions are let loose upon the Christian leader in the amphitheater, many spectators look on while Christians believers flock around the holy figure, worshipping him as they would Christ. The martyr looks to the sky, symbolizing God’s guidance and presence within him, giving him the strength to face his death.
“The Martyrdom of St. Peter” by Michaelangelo (1546-50): Depicts Peter being martyred surrounded by followers during the reign of Nero. Peter requested to be martyred upside-down on the cross, so as to not imitate the murder of his tutor, Christ.
Tentative Outline of Thesis

I. Introduction:
   A. Introduce Martyrdom
   B. Introduce the status of religions in the Roman Empire and their relation to the power of the Emperor
   C. Outline of the challenges that Christian Religion posed to the power of the emperor and to Romans in general.

II. Part One (I)
   A. Martyrdom of St. Peter and St. Paul – Reign of Nero c. 50-64 AD
   B. Martyrdom of Clement – Reign of Trajan, c. 99 or 101 AD
   C. Martyrdom of Ignatius – Reign of Trajan, c. 108 AD
   D. Martyrdom of Polycarp – Reign of Marcus Aurelius, c. 166-167 AD or Reign of Statius Quadratus, c. 155-156 AD
   E. Martyrdom of Felicitias – Reign of Antonius, c. 165
   F. Martyrdom of Justin – Reign of Marcus Aurelius, 165 AD
   G. Martyrdom of Pothinus – Reign of Marcus Aurelius, 177 AD
   H. Martyrdom of Blandina – Reign of Marcus Aurelius, 177 AD
   I. Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity – Reign of Septimus Severus, 203 AD
   J. Martyrdom of Iraneaeus Bishop of Sirimium – Reign of Diocletian, 304 AD

III. Part Two (II)
   A. Evaluate the writings of Celsus and Origen in Contra Celsus
   B. Writings of Tacitus – for language
   C. Tertullian’s Writings (selected)
   D. The Apologies of Justin
   E. The Epistles between various congregations and church leaders

IV. Conclusion
Bibliography

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