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Camilo Torres, Liberation Theology, and Marxism

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Introduction

The essay offers a critical re-reading of the life and works of the Colombian Catholic priest Camilo Torres Restrepo (1929–1966) through the prism of resistance to order and authority in the Catholic religion. Torres was a priest, a guerrilla, and a sociologist, combining all these three characteristics into an organic whole. During his life, he developed hostility towards Catholic authority (also due to his dialogue with Marxism) and concluded that violence was indispensable to change the situation of the Colombian poor. Even though he is often associated with the liberation theology approach, he cannot be properly considered a theologian of liberation since this Christian theological approach fully developed at the end of the 1960s, shortly after his death. The essay assesses the issue of whether he can be considered an integral part of liberation theology or a merely symbolic, iconic figure.

Marxism and its Relation to Christianity

The relations between Marxism and Christianity have been studied and debated possibly since Karl Marx's time (Janz, 1998; Kurian, 1974; Macintyre, 1984). Marx did not elaborate a positive assessment of religion in general since he thought religion was a tool of the ruling classes to oppress the proletariat. He expressed his contempt for religion in his works co-written with Friedrich Engels. In the *Manifesto* they made clear that religion was a "bourgeois prejudice" (Marx & Engels, 1980: 73) for the proletariat. Communism had to abolish all eternal truths, including religion (Marx & Engels, 1980: 86-87). Before writing the *Manifesto*, in his 1843 *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx defined religion as "the opium of the people" (Marx, 1975: 395). By "opium," Marx meant that religion revealed and covered reality at the same time. Communism and Marxism are usually seen as hostile to religion because in the first officially Marxism-inspired state, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), religion was strongly opposed by the political apparatus. Antireligious campaigns in the USSR began soon after the 1917 October Revolution and continued with varying degrees of radicalism until Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985. Scientific atheism was also taught in all schools and universities (Corley, 1996; Froese, 2004; Pospielovsky, 1987; Ramet, 1993; Smolkin, 2018).

However, in the dialectics of history, there are many examples of Marxism being intertwined with religion. One could name examples regarding Islam (Gellner, 1991; Talatoff, 2005), Judaism (Belfer, 2005) or Buddhism (Skaria, 2015). The Latin American case stands out among the many instances of Christian-Marxist dialogue

(Löwy, 1993). The most organic and developed product of this dialogue is the Latin American theology of liberation (Berryman, 1987; Boff, 1978; Ellacuría & Sobrino, 1990; Gutierrez Merino, 1975). Liberation theology had been in the making since the beginning of the 1960s, but it reached maturity towards the end of the decade. The works and life of Camilo Torres (1929–1966), the famous Colombian priest-guerrilla, can be useful to single out and analyze a few key concepts, which were later fully developed by liberation theology. After his death, Torres became an icon not only in Colombia and in the rest of Latin America but among many Catholics worldwide. According to Walter Joe Broderick (1980), he was "the Che Guevara of Catholics". The ethics of Torres and liberation theology often clashed with the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the Catholic Church's political status quo. This essay assesses a few questions related to Camilo Torres through a re-reading of his original works. Why did Torres turn so radically against ecclesiastic authority and order? Why and how did Marxism influence Torres' thoughts? Did resistance to authority, Christianity and Marxism influence Torres' violent choice? Was Torres a mere unimportant myth, only superficially connected to liberation theology?

Torres' Christianity and Marxism

The following sections refer to the collection of Camilo Torres' *Escritos* published in Bogotá by the Katariche publishing house in 1985 and on the book-interview with Torres published by the journalist Rafael Maldonado Piedrahita in 1957. There are more recent collections of Torres' works (2002), but I chose to refer to the Katariche edition because of its greater variety of materials. Thus, it is better suited to present a complete analysis of Torres' thoughts. The Katariche collection contains personal notes, letters, articles, interviews, conference papers and declarations by Torres, divided into six parts and an appendix. The division is extremely useful. This published collection of primary sources allows the reader to follow the religious, theological and ideological-political evolution of Camilo Torres from his first years in the seminar until his politicization and his death.

The anonymous introducer of Torres' writings notes that Camilo Torres lived at a time when the Catholic Church in Colombia was considered to be without opposition. The canonical trial against Torres was certainly "not a model of ecclesiastical dialogue" (Torres, 1985: 3). S/he also claims that Camilo Torres' story could possibly happen only in Colombia, because of the compact and stagnant Catholic tradition of that country; because of the subdued dependence that the tradition came to impose on the dispossessed classes; because of the rotating game of powers – mostly oligarchic powers – from the hands of the liberals to the hands of the conservatives; and because of the consubstantial appearance of democracy in Colombia, that justifies the situation of destitution in which the Colombian people lives. Torres' mother testified that he grew convinced that the situation of the subaltern could change only via the revolutionary, armed takeover of power by the popular classes (Torres, 1985: 4). In this, Torres was dramatically isolated in the Catholic Church.

However, why did Camilo Torres die "like an excommunicated person, under the bullets of 'legitimately established' order" (Torres, 1985: 4)? His rebellion against the church and state authorities happened over time. Torres made many

attempts at improving the situation with other means. He tried to influence public opinion, to mobilize the masses peacefully. He collaborated with official programs in the fields of education, cooperatives, and agrarian reform. Looking at these developments, his decision to take up arms was taken after many experiences with personal defeat (Torres, 1985: 6-7). Torres was a sociologist as well as a priest. Sociology gave him tools to understand Colombian society deeply. He took his final decision after making a severe analysis of Colombian society and its Church. In his opinion, the Colombian clergy and especially its hierarchy were completely alien from the necessity of social justice (Torres, 1985: 53). Torres, who was of bourgeois origins, thought the only way to change Colombia was to oppose the bourgeoisie, live with the poor, and have faith in its values. He concluded that "all lukewarm reformism" (Torres, 1985: 5) was out of date and that to make the revolution was the only way to love the people.

Torres' strong social and political convictions also stemmed from his strong Christian faith. Looking at Communist hostility towards religion, it may sound a strange comparison, but I argue that some of Torres' claims are compatible with historical materialism. The possibility and sometimes the necessity of Christian-Communist dialogue and collaboration are not new. Several 20th-century authors made this point. In the mid-1970s, the Indian K. Mathew Kurian noted that though Marx and Engels negatively treated religion, Engels conceded that early Christianity was a truly revolutionary movement (Kurian, 1974: 3). Kurian also argued that positive changes had been happening within Christianity in the previous decades, since Pope John XXIII ended the old "anti-communist phobia" (Kurian, 1974: 15), granting that Christian-Communist dialogue was possible. Kurian was not alone. The Scottish-American philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) also wrote a book stressing important common points between Marxism and Christianity. The historian of religions Denis R. Janz (1998), conversely, maintains that Christianity and Marxism dialogued so much throughout history that, willing or not, Christianity absorbed many Marxist characteristics. A Marxist scholar like Domenico Losurdo contended that Christianity – which was in a way the "intimate retreat" that followed the defeat of the National Jewish Revolution – "stimulated the emergence of a universalistic thought" (2012: 29). More to the point of Torres' compatibility with historical materialism, this compatibility is shown by Torres' attention to material, concrete, historical matters and by his studies on how to change his country's material conditions. In a way, he wanted to change history, and his strong conviction of the necessity of these material changes is strongly reminiscent of historical materialism.

Torres began to denounce the Catholic hierarchy in 1965 publicly. In his opinion, the Church was far from the Gospel. Instead, it had been contaminated by power and money, in a sense prostituting itself to the rich. He concluded that the Church was strongly allied with those structures he wanted to change, as required by love (Torres, 1985: 54). His conflict with the Catholic hierarchy was also due to his role as a political leader. When the Church tried to enclose him into an office, Torres said that he was disgusted by the fact that they wanted to put him away from the world's problems (Torres, 1985: 10). There was a clear incompatibility of values because Torres saw the priesthood as a service to his neighbour to create a *radically human* world. His decision to abandon the priesthood caused him personal issues,

also because he could no longer celebrate the Eucharist. However, he thought he was preparing a different, radical Eucharist: no longer with exploiters and exploited together, but with all humans as equals (Torres, 1985: 11).

Torres' challenge to authority cannot be understood without his alliance with Marxists. Torres' dialogue and alliance with Marxists have been highlighted and studied by several scholars, like his biographer Walter Joe Broderick (1996). However, also Alejandro Sánchez Lopera (2006), Darío Martínez Morales (2011), Daniel H. Levine (2011) and Lucia Picarella (2019) underlined this crucial link, without which any discussion on Torres would be incomplete. Torres' welcoming attitude towards Marxism was not born in a void. Michael Löwy emphasized in a crucial article that, since the early 1960s in Latin America, Marxism and Christianity developed a "surprising convergence", which was "one of the most important factors of social transformation in the modern history of the hemisphere" (1993: 28). Löwy was convinced that the "profound change" which "occurred in Latin American Catholic culture as a result of broad sectors having embraced and incorporated some of the basic tenets of Marxism" amounted to no less than an "irreversible historical fact" (1993: 28). Most scholars, however, focused on the contributions of Marxism – and of other Marxist thinkers like Gramsci (Semeraro, 2016) – to liberation theology (Tahar Chaouch, 2007).

Torres' thoughts and deeds deserve study precisely because they evolved in an early stage of liberation theology. According to Torres, the Marxist-Christian alliance was indispensable to bring about political change in Colombia. Structures could change, but only "with a pressure from the majority, be it a peaceful or violent pressure, according with the attitude of the minority leading class" (Torres, 1985: 9). In Torres' eyes, the leaders could be Christians or Marxists. If they were Marxists, Christians must support them. In a way, Camilo Torres was a pragmatist. He recognized that there were basic incompatibilities between Christianity and Marxism because the latter was a materialist and atheist philosophy. However, there were more points of incompatibility between *his* Christianity and the Church than between Christianity and Marxism. Therefore, he repeatedly attacked anti-communism because he saw in it – masked by Christianity and patriotism – a defence of the ruling classes and of the Church, which in his view defended structural and ethically unacceptable privileges. Torres recognized several useful technical contributions from Marx. Moreover, he viewed the Marxian critique of religion as helpful to find a more authentic Christianity (Torres, 1985: 11).

The Radicalisation of Camilo Torres

Reading his personal notes written while he was a seminarist, Torres sounds like an average, extremely pious young priest (Torres, 1985: 15-16). However, a 1956 interview was released to the journalist Rafael Maldonado Piedrahita – which was published in a book titled *Conversaciones con un sacerdote colombiano* (Maldonado Piedrahita, 1957) – revealed the first signs of radicalization. At the time, Torres was doing research in Bogotá for his sociology thesis. Though he acknowledged the existence of remnants of feudalism in Colombia, he thought that by that time, Colombia was in a regime of industrial capitalism. This capitalism, however, was not improving but instead exploiting the country. Torres was convinced that

Indigenous America was a victim of North American economic imperialism. This imperialism could be summarised as profiting from cheap labour and raw sources. Moreover, imperialism brought a sense of responsibility away from those whom it exploited. However, at the time, Torres was not ideologically *a priori* in favour of any other political system.

To a question on whether the Church had an exclusively spiritual approach to social problems, Torres answered that a spiritual approach did not exclude a socioeconomic one, in the light of an "integral" Christian humanism (Maldonado Piedrahita, 1957: 44-45). He also claimed that socioeconomic reality used to be neglected by Christianity. On the other hand, Socialism presented these issues more violently, while, according to the Abbé Pierre, "Catholics had forgotten certain pages of the Gospel" (Maldonado Piedrahita, 1957: 45). According to Torres, Socialism began to influence the Church immediately after the publication of "Marx's Socialist Manifesto in 1847" (Maldonado Piedrahita, 1957: 46). The Church was influenced by Socialism in its attitude rather than in its doctrine.

Overall, Torres thought that Christians (and also Jews) had fought socioeconomic inequalities in the past. While the Gospel was not intended to change society, it indirectly influenced important changes like the abolition of slavery, the democratic valorization of the human being and Marxist humanism. According to Torres, Marxist humanism was, indirectly, a product of the Christian humanist movement (Maldonado Piedrahita, 1957: 64-65).

In a 1964 text on economic planning, Torres noted that he ideally believed in a plural society. He was not per se opposed to any ideology, including Marxism. He had a positive, even though the somewhat one-sided and optimistic opinion of the economic accomplishments of the Soviet Union:

> The Soviet Union, to a large extent thanks to its system of economic planning, with state control on the means of production, has come to be today at least the second world economic power, departing from a state of underdevelopment in 1917. (Torres, 1985: 40)

Looking at sheer figures, Torres had a point, since the development of the Soviet Union was certainly something unprecedented in history. However, he did not know or did not comment on the human cost, the contradictions and the chaos which went along with this development, which included millions slaughtered under the rule of Stalin. Analyzing how the majority classes could exert political pressure on the ruling minority, he noted a few ideas. Firstly, it was difficult to find political organizations, but they could be masked as social ones and go underground. The popular classes lacked motivation. They needed the struggle to get motivated. The clearer the motivation is, the easier it is to acquire it. Political, economic, and social pressure had to go hand in hand. He intended all actions, "legal and illegal, peaceful and violent", to bring about the certain governmental decision by political pressures. These decisions could be "within the existing political structures; they could reform them; or they could change them". Consequently, political pressures could be meant to "obtain accidental changes, to reform these structures or to change them" (Torres, 1985: 44-46).

According to Torres, the majority classes had been so far engaged in struggles for accidental – i.e. not structural – changes, like a few economic improvements. Reformist changes are transitionary changes; that is, they imply the interests of both classes. These solutions do not change structures, but they adapt to the interests of both classes. They could also prepare society for fundamental changes. A *revolutionary change* was meant to change *the structure*: property, income, investment, consumption, political and administrative organization. International relations also change from an economic, cultural, political point of view. The ruling class acts in a different way, according to the intensity of the pressure coming from the popular classes and can act according to the principle "to sacrifice something not to lose everything" (Torres, 1985: 47). In conclusion, Torres argued that: 1) in underdeveloped countries there could not be changes without pressure from the popular classes; 2) a peaceful revolution could happen if the ruling class had a high level of *foresight* (mind that according to Torres, foresight was a sort of realism, different from a *desire* to change things); 3) violent revolution was likely because ruling classes had a low level of foresight. To sum up: economic planning oriented towards the majority was not possible without a structural change that would allow the majority to exert political pressure, and economic planning could be done only by the state. Torres stated that Christians had to contribute to political change without betraying the practice of charity. Their reaction should not be opportunist or defeatist. Like Christ, they should incarnate into humanity, into its culture and into its history. In other words, they should try to affect socioeconomic structures (Torres, 1985: 48). Torres was convinced that Marxism and Christianity were the only two movements that could bring about political change.

Camilo Torres and Liberation Theology

According to several authors, Camilo Torres foresaw the key tenets of the theology of liberation. Phillip Berryman (1987) noted that Camilo Torres intuitively laid the foundation stone of what later developed into the theology of liberation. Martínez Morales also concurred that Torres was "without any doubt […] pioneer" (2011: 161) of certain ideas of the theology of liberation, such as the justification of emancipatory violence. Certainly, there are many common points between Torres' thoughts and liberation theology. However, an interesting question to pose is: are these similarities just coincidental? That is: did theologians of liberation develop similar ideas just because they lived in the same Latin American circumstances, or were they actively, consciously inspired by Torres? To assess this question, an analysis of a few works of the main theologians of liberation is in order.

In his book *Teología de la liberación. Perspectivas* (1975), the Peruvian theologian of liberation Gustavo Gutiérrez Merino noted that the strong socioeconomic polarisation of Latin America brought the oppressed in contact with Marxists. He specifically mentioned Camilo Torres as one of the crucial examples of politically active priests (Gutiérrez Merino, 1975: 143). To corroborate that Christian-Marxist dialogue in Latin American was fruitful, he quoted Fidel Castro, who praised Torres in a 1969 speech:

> The Case of Camilo Torres demonstrates this: a priest went there to die for the fighters for the liberation of his people. And for this, he constitutes a whole symbol of revolutionary unity for the peoples of Latin America. (Gutiérrez Merino, 1975: 140)

For Gutiérrez Merino, Torres was a committed Christian who "escaped" the Church, which did not understand the gravity of Latin American socioeconomic problems. Those like Torres who thought differently were regarded as "unruly and even dangerous members" (Gutiérrez Merino, 1975: 266) of the Church. In Gutiérrez's opinion, however, to leave the Church and to try to build something else outside was not desirable. He hoped in a renewed Church where people like Torres would consistently feel at home.

One more important theologian of liberation who was inspired by Torres was the Nicaraguan Ernesto Cardenal. Cardenal (1925–2020) was a famous poet and served as Minister of Culture in the Sandinista government between 1979 and 1987. In 1984, he was suspended from the priesthood by John Paul II. The book *La santidad de la revolución* (1976) is a dialogue between Cardenal and a German interviewer, Hermann Schulz. Describing the humble wooden house where Cardenal lived, Schulz noted: "On the […] walls hang posters of Sandino, of Camilo Torres […] and Ernesto 'Che' Guevara […] Over Ernesto's bed, a big crucifix made of oxidated metal pieces" (Cardenal, 1976: 14-15). When discussing religious groups rejected by the official Church, Cardenal declared that the official Church deviated from "true Christianity" (1976: 41) and that "the first task of the Christian is to make revolution. Revolutionary struggle is a priestly struggle, like Camilo Torres said" (1976: 56). Another important meeting point between Cardenal and Torres is a collaboration with Marxists. According to Cardenal, "[i]f Marxists need Christians for the establishment of Socialism, also Christians need Marxists for the establishment of God's kingdom on the earth" (Cardenal, 1976: 59). Cardenal even included Torres in a poem:

> There is resurrection of the flesh. Otherwise
> how can you have permanent revolution?
> One day "El Tiempo" came joyfully out to the streets of Bogotá
> (it arrived even here in Solentiname) CAMILO TORRES IS DEAD
> huge black letters
> and he is more alive than ever challenging "El Tiempo".
> Also like in that editorial of the *New York Times*
> If it is true that he died in Bolivia, as it seems,
> A myth ended together with a man. (Cardenal, 1976: 101)

The resurrection of the flesh probably refers to Christ's as well as to Torres' death. The resurrection of the flesh is necessary to have "permanent revolution", a term reminiscent of Trotsky (1986). In the writings of theologians of liberation, however, the life choices of Camilo Torres are not always presented without criticism. For instance, the Argentinian-Mexican theologian of liberation Enrique Dussel wrote in 1990 that Torres' choice to join the guerrillas was certainly an example of

"extreme commitment" which, however, was "the end of the '*foquista*' experience" (Ellacuría & Sobrino, 1990: 117) chosen by many young people in the 1960s. By "'*foquista*' experience", Dussel meant Che Guevara's strategy of *foquismo*, that is: even a small group of committed guerrillas (the *foco*) can trigger a revolution in the Latin American context. Even if all necessary conditions for revolution are not immediately present, the *foco* will help bring them about (Gabbas, 2017). Dussel probably implied that the *foquista* strategy had failed in many cases. Torres' death symbolized the end of that strategy, which had become outdated. "Another path has to be discovered," urged Dussel (Ellacuría & Sobrino, 1990: 117). For other theologians of liberation, however, Camilo Torres does not seem to have been a source of inspiration, at least not an explicit one. In the main works of important theologians of liberation, there are no explicit references to Torres. This is the case of the Brazilian Leonardo Boff (1978) – who sometimes wrote with his brother Clodovis (1986) – and of the Uruguayans Juan Luis Segundo (1978, 1989) and Julio de Santa Ana (1985). The Argentinian José Míguez Bonino (2007), Juan Carlos Scannone (2005), the Chilean Segundo Galilea (1978), the Basque-Salvadorian Jon Sobrino (1984), Pedro Casaldáliga and José María Vigil (1992) also do not mention Torres explicitly.

Camilo Torres Between Myth and Reality

According to Daniel H. Levine (2011), the fact that many liberation theologians do not explicitly mention Torres is no surprise. Claiming that Torres was an impatient idealist, Levine argues that the practice of liberation theology was very different from Torres'. While liberation theology built on a long and patient work of education and communal charity, Torres looked for shorter paths and was fundamentally unaware of the political context and consequences of his choices. Therefore, Levine claims that Torres was an icon, an inspiring myth for liberation theology, but his concrete, actual contribution may be dismissed as irrelevant. Levine's argument deserves discussion because within the literature on Torres, he is one of the few authors whose interpretation is not very sympathetic. Certainly, Levine is right in expressing caution at excessively idolizing Torres (2011: 78-79). Idolisation does not work in historical accounts, and critical approaches are always welcome. However, I maintain that Levine's arguments are flawed and partial in many ways. Levine insists on Torres being a mere icon, but his argument can be turned upside down. Roberto Niccolai (1998: 65) conceptualized the "necessity of myth." A myth can be someone "able to polarise the aspirations of a community or of an epoch, rising up as a privileged or transcendent symbol" (Niccolai, 1998: 65). Doubtless, Torres was one of these symbols, especially for the Latin American Left, and especially for leftist Catholics. Torres may have been a myth and an icon, but an important one. Levine also criticizes Torres because of his supposed "totalizing rationalism" (Levine, 2011: 59) and "positivism" (Levine, 2011: 85). In Levine's view, Torres' sociological work was simple, deductive, and mechanical. Allegedly, Torres did not consider that his sociological findings may be wrong and that others' may be right.

His sociological studies' selection shows that Torres was a serious, thorough and principled scholar who did meticulous research. What made him different

from other sociologists is that he presented views against the grain and was so convinced that he decided to put them into practice. If we accuse Camilo Torres of something, it must be excessive consistency. Far from being an idealist, Torres was a pragmatist and extreme realist since he saw that the so-called democratic methods in Colombia were the instrument to "favour a wealthy minority" (Levine, 2011: 76). Levine quotes Valencia Tovar highlighting Torres' supposed idealism (2011: 87-88), but Valencia Tovar's opinion is problematic, to say at least since he was one of the generals responsible for Torres' death. Nor is it true that Torres was so self-confident and affected by "clericalism" (Levine, 2011: 84) that he did not concede others may be right. On the contrary, though he was an extremely pious Christian, he thought that Marxism was superior to Christian thought in many respects because the former had more "scientific logic" (Levine, 2011: 81). Finally, Levine also claims that Torres did not understand that "politics is never simple" (2011: 74). Obviously, politics is never simple, and with hindsight, it is easy to lambast Torres for not having adopted the "right" policy. Torres' choice may seem wrong in retrospect – he was soon killed, and the guerrillas quickly disbanded after his death – but a historian must look at facts in their historical context. Fidel Castro's success also influenced Torres' excessive optimism. Only a few years before, Fidel Castro had docked Cuba on a wrecked boat with only a handful on *barbudos*, yet he spectacularly managed to seize power. Moreover, Levine (2011: 79) admitted that the Torres inspired Nicaraguan Sandinistas to took power. However, despite the criticism or the praise of his figure, Torres made a change in the Latin American world and remains a symbol of the revolution of the poor.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analyzed secondary and primary sources show that Torres developed his contempt for ecclesiastic and state authorities because of a complex chain of causes and through a long, troubled process. His final violent choice may be termed the mix of three key ingredients: a radical, humanist version of Christianity; Marxist influence; and his profound sociological convictions. His radical version of Christianity justified him to adopt force as means of social change. Torres integrated his radical, human version of Christianity with Marxism, which he saw as a precious tool of social change. Sociology was the third element that convinced Torres of the necessity of force to acquire a social change in Colombia. Sociology was, for Torres, a scientific tool that unmasked *ideology* in the Marxian sense of the word, that is, a smokescreen making determinate socioeconomic and political constructs look like an eternal reality. Torres' sociology, however, was an active and militant one. Torres' militancy, however, did not stop at critical writing essays since he thought that he should go from the library to the battlefield.

Finally, I want to stress once more that the fact that Torres was a "myth," an "icon", and a "symbol" does not imply that he was an unimportant one. Quite the reverse is true (enough to look at the popular songs on Torres sung by Los Olimareños, Victor Jara, and Judith Reyes). One must not forget that one of the reasons for this persistence is Torres' martyrdom, a *topos* that has exceptional importance in the Christian religion. Martyrdom may also explain the immense

popularity enjoyed by Torres' Argentinian-Cuban alter ego, Ernesto Guevara. Looking at the photographs of their cadavers, one sees they are quite similar: two bearded men laid on a stretcher with a bare, wounded chest (the signs of martyrdom). Though Guevara became immensely more popular and famous than Torres, the *topos* of martyrdom may explain the persistence of both myths.

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