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Francis Kyle

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## Book Review

### *Christian Martyrdom: A Brief History with Reflections for Today*

By Edward L. Smither

Cascade Books, 2020

98 pages

Paperback

Reviewed by Francis Kyle. He is a pastor and independent scholar near Roanoke Rapids, N.C., a graduate of The Prairie College, Toronto Baptist Seminary, and Western Seminary, and a member of the Evangelical Missiological Society, Evangelical Theological Society, American Society of Church History, and Nineteenth-Century Studies Association.

Christians must accept and embrace that suffering and martyrdom are key components to being a committed follower of Christ the Suffering Servant (Is. 53). The author appeals to the Bible, theology, missiology, and history to prove his argument while seeking to jolt and awaken the twenty-first century Christian in the West who craves a pain-free “blessed” life of comfort, affluence, material prosperity, and political power. With the blood of the martyrs being the “seed” of the church (Tertullian, *ca.* 155–240), those who have suffered and died on account of their public witness for Christ provide the church with three key inspirational themes and outcomes, namely, bold verbal witness unto Christ (Chapter 3), courageous prophetic voice against the kingdoms of this world (Chapter 4), and deliberate praise and worship of the living God (Chapter 5).

In contrast to Moss’s revisionist approach in *Ancient Christian Martyrdom* (2012) and *The Myth of Persecution* (2013), Smither holds to the majority view that periodic persecution and martyrdom did indeed

occur in the early church (xv), that such historical accounts were accurate and were not the invention of fourth-century Christians. The focus of Smither's slim, 98-page work is "admittedly simpler" (xvi) than other recent scholarly and popular books such as *Persecuted* (Marshall, Gilbert, Shea, 2013), *Martyrdom* (Middleton, 2011), *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Frend, 1965, 2008), and *Their Blood Cries Out* (Marshall & Gilbert, 1997). It contains an introduction, bibliography, and index. Twelve pages is the average chapter length.

The author's compassionate pastoral tone and balanced approach are commendable. He avoids the extreme of exalting the martyr (hagiography) and avoids promoting an unscriptural martyr complex (the desire and intentional effort at heroically being killed for one's faith for posthumous fame or greater eternal reward). He also avoids the other extreme of being emotionally aloof to the martyr's hardship and pain. With an impressive economy of words, he masterfully covers the topic. He even addresses common questions and objections in addition to providing reflections for today's global church.

Smither's inclusion of non-persecuted, fourth- to sixteenth-century monks as the "new (spiritual) martyr" (21–25) might be a stretch. He bases it on the monk's asceticism and intentional effort at identifying with Christ's suffering and death. Besides this potential disagreement by some, the book's weaknesses are minimal.

*Christian Martyrdom* is ideal for the undergraduate student, missionary, church leader, or serious-minded layperson desiring a succinct, well-written, affordable, and scholarly yet accessible introduction to the topic. Its convincing message that suffering is a normal part of Christian discipleship—and that it allows one to identify more closely with the "rejected...man of sorrows" (Isa. 53:3) who "suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps" (1 Pet. 2:21)—is a tough sell to the non-persecuted who is "at ease in Zion" (Amos 6:1), such as the Western Christian. But it is a scriptural and much-needed message that is supported by history. This is a timely book that will challenge the reader and is highly recommended.

## References

- Marshall, P., Gilbert, L, Shea, N. (2013). *Persecuted: The global assault on Christians*. Thomas Nelson.
- Middleton, P. (2011). *Martyrdom: A guide for the perplexed*. T&T Clark.
- Frend, W. (2008). *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*. James Clark & Company.
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