

3 Signatures of the Martyr Figure

3.1 *The Martyr Figure as a Counterpart of the Sovereign*

The figure of the martyr has been investigated from many points of view through different theoretical and methodological models. In recent years, it has been the subject of research in various academic disciplines. Since the attack on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, greater attention has been paid especially to the ideologies of martyrdom in Islamic culture and society.¹ Beyond terrorist attacks, other contemporary social phenomena also contributed to the proliferation of studies and research on the topic, such as self-immolation and other forms of physical destruction or injury during the Arab Spring and the Arab–Israeli conflict.² All these events have re-drawn attention to the phenomena and contexts of political violence.

Studies on martyrdom are heterogeneous.³ Both general and specific historical studies exist: for example, Paul Middleton describes the general development of martyrdom, as a concept and as a social phenomenon in Christianity, Islam and Judaism, while other studies focalize on the role and function of the martyr figure in specific historical contexts.⁴ Moreover, in recent years many anthologies were published which examine martyrdom as a cultural phenomenon in relation to, among others, visual art, film, theater, poetry and prose.⁵ Other researchers specifically focus on the issue of martyrdom as a «religious–political challenge».⁶

Although a plurality of interests, questions, and hypotheses exists, one can distinguish between essentialist and constructivist approaches to the martyr figure. The essentialist position attempts to define the «being and essence of the martyr», which is obviously highly problematic, since, by distinguishing true (and good) martyrs from false (and bad) martyrs, it can

1 See Gambetta 2005; Pedazhur 2006; Kepel 2015; Ali/Post 2008; Juergensmeyer 2008.

2 See Khalili 2007; Allen 2006; Allen 2009; Fierke 2013.

3 Key works on martyrdom include Bowersock 2002; Boyarin 1999; Castelli 2004; Wicker 2006; Cook 2007; Middleton 2011; Mitchell 2013.

4 See Middleton 2011; Hung 2008; McWilliam 1995; Spiegeleer 2014.

5 See Krass 2008; Horsch 2011; Pannewick 2004; Weigel 2007a.

6 Niewiadomski 2011.

and often is used by certain individuals or social groups to deny the martyr role and status to other individuals or social groups. Those who want to prevent the martyr figure from being «exploited» by others, always advocate the essentialist and normative approach. Those who choose the essentialist perspective often decide on the basis of ethical, religious and/or political convictions. The essentialist approach has its historical roots in Christian theology, which since its beginnings has sought to establish criteria in order to determine the essence of martyrdom.⁷ But the essentialist perspective does not only belong to the Christian theologies of past ages. The essentialist definition can also be found in contemporary debates and writings about phenomena of political violence. As Sigrid Weigel notes,

the discrepancy between the European conceptions of martyrs, which have their origin in Christian history, and television pictures from the international battlefields, with scenarios of Shi'ite or Sunni worshipping martyrs, often triggers a discussion as to whether the suicide bombers [...] are «true martyrs». [...] The criteria for who is recognized as a martyr are always formulated from the perspective of a certain confession.⁸

Today, this approach is often criticized in academic writings as a form of dangerous cultural essentialism.⁹ In fact, one of the main characteristics of the new academic orientation in dealing with the topic of political violence and the figure of the martyr is the transition from an essentialist to a constructivist approach. Where the essentialist approach tends to involve a fixed definition of martyrdom—based on the definition, an event is then determined to be an act of martyrdom or not—, the constructivist approach instead analyzes the social and cultural production of the figure of the martyr and the self-allocation of the martyr role. The fundamental question asked in current research on martyrdom is therefore: How and for what purpose are martyrs «made»? However, despite the criticism of essentialist approaches and although the issue is discussed in different ways and from different perspectives, many researchers support the thesis that the emergence of martyr figures and the allocation of martyr roles have a polit-

7 Clement of Alexandria, who condemns «voluntary martyrdom» as a form of «self-killing», was the first to distinguish between «true» and «false» martyrdom; in this regard see Middleton 2014, 123.

8 Weigel 2007, 16.

9 See Weigel 2007b, 16–19; Krass/Frank 2008, 8; Middleton 2011, 1–30.

ical function.¹⁰ What does this political function consist of? Why does the figure of the martyr always, or at least so often, emerge in relation to contexts of political struggle?

In the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Samuel Klausner defines martyrdom as an act of self-sacrifice, which «imbues economic and political conflict with sacred meaning» and «aims to reduce political authority to ineffectiveness by challenging the sacred basis of the legitimacy of the adversary's authority. [...] The martyr [...] is a sacred symbol of an authority around which the society rallies.»¹¹ Although Klausner does not express it explicitly, at the roots of this view there is undoubtedly the idea, exposed by Hubert and Mauss, that sacrifice is a *sacrum facere*, a ritual practice that consecrates the sacrificial victim.¹² Through sacrifice, the victim passes from the realm of the profane to the realm of the sacred (in Durkheim's sense of the terms). Martyrdom, as an act of self-sacrifice, consecrates both the victim and the political authority of the social group to which the victim belongs. The self-sacrifice of the victims of political violence legitimizes a new political order.

Another important issue in current research on the martyr figure is the distinction, which plays a decisive role in the mimetic theory of René Girard, between the sacrifice of the scapegoat and the self-sacrifice of the martyr. According to Girard, at the core of sacrifice there is substitution, that is, fury felt toward one party is redirected toward a surrogate scapegoat, who was chosen only because of his or her vulnerability and dispensability.¹³ The sacrificial object is thus an innocent who pays the debt of a guilty party. From this point of view, sacrifice is a ritual practice through which a community is reconciled to itself by the extermination of a victim. By contrast, Girard describes (Christian) martyrdom as the annulment of the «violent sacred», because of its recognition of the victim's innocence.¹⁴ Maria Grazia Recupero dedicates an extensive anthropological–philosophical work to martyrdom, in which the Girardian conceptualization of martyrdom is well summarized. The general thesis is that in the historical transition from archaic myths to the mythical–ritual structure of Christianity, disclosure of the sacrificial mechanism occurred, through which sacrifice assumed a political function. The strength of the archaic myth—in which

10 See Weigel 2007b, 13–15; Fierke 2013; Krass/Frank 2008, 7–21; Recupero 2011.

11 Klausner 2005, 5738.

12 See Hubert/Mauss 1964.

13 See Girard 1979.

14 See Kirwan 2009, 921.

the sacrifice of the scapegoat is able to end a social crisis —is its ability to «hide» the victim. Martyrdom, in contrast, showcases the innocence of the victim and thus the arbitrariness of sacrifice. In other words, the archaic sacrifice legitimates the status quo, whereas the Christian anti-sacrifice constitutes and legitimates the future community.¹⁵

Karin Fierke, a researcher in international relations, also supports the argument that the martyr figure delegitimizes the status quo and legitimates new forms of political community. She describes sacrifice as a «form of life» or a practice which is visible across cultures yet is embedded in different systems of meaning.¹⁶ Unlike Girard and Recupero, she argues that self-sacrifice, rather than being a substitution, «is an *act of speech* in which the suffering body communicates the injustice experienced by a community to a larger audience.»¹⁷ Since the sacrifice of the material body is an act that communicates without words, it must be understood as an inversion of the speech act, that is, the illocutionary act, which has a certain *force* in the act of saying. By contrast, she considers self-sacrifice as a perlocutionary act because it produces effects in the feelings, thoughts or actions of the audience. She criticizes Girard's argument because it is based on the distinction between pre-modern practices of sacrifice and their elimination in modernity, while contemporary self-sacrifice is a political weapon, which crosses the boundaries between the two:

On the one hand, the frameworks for attributing meaning to the act are [...] at least in part religious, but also refer to international laws relating to human rights. On the other hand, the use of self-sacrifice as a political weapon has been facilitated by the development of a global, and particularly a visual, media. [...] In this respect, acts of political self-sacrifice are situated across three different ways of organizing life: the pre-modern religious; the rationalized modern state, which is part of the international system; and the globalizing postmodern culture of the media. Against this background, political self-sacrifice may play a role in bringing alternative forms of community into being.¹⁸

From this point of view, she argues that political self-sacrifice in modernity does not involve the substitution of a marginalized victim, by which existing power structures are reinforced and legitimized, but rather communi-

15 See Recupero 2010, 20.

16 Fierke 2013, 33.

17 Fierke 2013, 37.

18 Fierke 2013, 38.

cates a political message on behalf of a marginalized community, potentially contributing to its regeneration.¹⁹ On the basis of four examples from the period after World War II, she argues that an injured or dead body can function as a medium of an experienced injustice.²⁰ Fierke compares the functioning of the act of self-sacrifice within modern and contemporary societies with «traditional» ritual action, which transforms the profane into the sacred.²¹ She indicates formality, traditionalism, invariance, and shared features with theatrical performance as main characteristics of successful ritual actions.²² She quotes Chaterine Bell, who states that «ritualization is the way to construct power relations when the power is claimed to be from God, not from military might or economic superiority.»²³ Self-sacrifice, she argues, is a sacralizing act that transfers the divine qualities of the sacrificed victim to the marginalized community. According to this view, the martyr is the person who, sacrificing himself for the sake of an oppressed community, makes the injustice and arbitrariness of violence exercised by those who hold political authority visible on his or her body and, at the same time, sacralizes the marginalized community. Fierke refers explicitly to Giorgio Agamben's conceptualization of «bare life»:

The visualization of «bare life» in images of the body is a central element of the emotional impact [...]. The observer is faced with «bare life», stripped of its social meaning, standing alone and facing his or her own mortality [...] The sight of the suffering body represents a confrontation with «bare life» that is followed by a struggle to inscribe it with meaning, which is spectacularized by the visual nature of the performance.²⁴

Thus, the visualization of bare life not only delegitimizes dominant power structures, but also potentially legitimizes alternative forms of community. According to Fierke, the transformative power of self-sacrifice lies in the reconstitution of the boundaries surrounding the individual body that is sacrificed and a larger «body politic»:

19 Fierke 2013, 54.

20 The hunger strikes of 1980–1981 in Northern Ireland; the martyrdom of the Polish Roman Catholic priest Popieluszko in 1984; the self-immolation of Buddhist monks in Vietnam in the early sixties; self-sacrifice in the Middle East.

21 Fierke 2013, 44.

22 Fierke 2013, 40–44.

23 Bell 2009, 116.

24 Fierke 2013, 79, 101–102.

The agent of political self-sacrifice, often referred to as a martyr, becomes the embodiment of the suffering nation. If Hobbes' *Leviathan* [...] is the symbol of the authoritarian sovereign, who embodies the people, the martyr is the embodiment of the nation, which seeks to transcend its humiliation through a restoration of dignity and sovereignty. The two images, Leviathan and the martyr, are not mutually exclusive in a situation of this kind but are, rather, the site of contestation and a struggle for recognition.²⁵

In fact, the main goal of her study is to contrast the image of the Leviathan, in which the body of the biblical monster contains the peoples of the state, with the image of the martyr as the symbol of resisting people when the state violates its commitment to protect. Finally, she argues, «self-sacrifice is a performance of speech in a context in which speech has been silenced. It expresses a desire to have a voice.»²⁶

Interestingly, we find a very similar theoretical model in Sigrid Weigel's studies on the martyr figure.²⁷ She assumes that in the violent death of the martyr, life is reduced to its purely fleshly dimension (unsurprisingly, she too refers to the concept of «bare life»), and that precisely this reduction leads to the sacralization of the dead body. Death acquires a metaphysical sense and gains the status of a profession of faith. The body itself becomes a witness of truth. The martyr is the paradigmatic figure of one who, even in death, remains steadfast in his or her faith. In reference to Carl Schmitt, Weigel sees the martyr as a dialectical negation of the sovereign. For those who are brutalized by the sovereign power and who live in submission, opting for martyrdom represents the ability to act «sovereignly». If the sovereign is defined as the one who decides *on* the state of exception, who has power over «bare life», the martyr is the one who decides *in* the state of exception.²⁸ Weigel also observes a return of the figure of the martyr in secularized societies and considers it an ideal medium for ritual reproduction. Through photography, film and the Internet the reproducibility of martyrological representation has increased exponentially.²⁹ Weigel describes martyrs as «media of ritual reproducibility»: images, narratives and rituals contribute to the spread of the martyr figure, which serves as a model for imitation. The perfect interplay between the martyr figure and the most

25 Fierke 2013, 53.

26 Fierke 2013, 247.

27 See Weigel 2006; Weigel 2007b.

28 See Weigel 2007b, 12.

29 See Weigel 2007b, 21.

advanced media technology, she argues, can only be understood by analyzing the structure of the martyr's «performative, ritual reproducibility».³⁰ Furthermore, the compatibility of global media technology with religious symbols and cults is guaranteed by images: in the era of the digital reproducibility of images, the dynamics of ritually re-produced martyr figures are accelerated and amplified.³¹

This means that to fully understand the performativity of the martyr figure, it is not enough to analyze martyrdom as a performance of the body, in the sense of self-sacrifice as an act of speech, but also the performativity of discursive practices and the manifestation and materialization of these practices in the public space. Here too, Weigel and Fierke seem to follow a similar interpretive path. In fact, the latter explicitly states that the sacrificial act alone is not sufficient to produce the delegitimization of the political authority in charge. The act itself can be described and represented not only as a form of martyrdom, but also as a suicide (or murder-suicide in the case of suicide bombings). This depends on the attribution of meaning, that is, how the act is represented. Based on her empirical study, Fierke identifies a formal constant in the dynamics between the act and its linguistic representation. In all four cases she analyzes, the community to which the agent of self-sacrifice belongs, tends to politicize and sacralize the act by representing it martyrologically. Conversely, the social actors who recognize the sovereign power in force tend to depoliticize the act by representing it as a suicide or murder-suicide. Referring to Wittgenstein, Fierke proposes a distinction between two language games:

The first language game of martyrdom provides a structure of rules within which the resistance gives meanings to acts of political self-sacrifice. The martyr is a witness to injustice, which refers to the humiliation of a population vis-à-vis what is defined as an occupying power, as distinguished from the historical but oppressed community that the resistance seeks to restore. This draws on a larger international discourse on human rights, which prohibits humiliation and highlights the dignity of all people. [...] The second language game expresses the meaning structure employed by state authorities, which depoliticizes, by identifying the actor as a criminal or terrorist, whose death may be attributed to «suicide». The naming of the criminal or terrorist is part of a securitizing move that identifies an existential threat to the state,

30 Weigel 2007b, 20.

31 See Weigel 2007b, 21.

which links to a larger international discourse of sovereignty and justifies the punishment or elimination of this extremist element.³²

According to Fierke, there are thus two different language games that operate on the basis of two competing discourses—the discourse of sovereignty and the discourse on human rights—which refer to the same event. The act of political self-sacrifice is, from this point of view, the site of a discursive contestation.

We have thus reached the heart of this study: the role of language and discourse in the construction and contestation of martyr figures. Let us attempt to summarize the aforementioned considerations. Firstly, as pointed out by Fierke, the act of self-sacrifice alone is not enough to make a martyr. A martyr must be represented and then become socially recognized as a martyr. In other words, in order for someone to be able to emerge as a martyr figure, it is not sufficient for an audience to witness the martyr's violent death; someone must represent the event of violence *as* a form of martyrdom. From this point of view, we can define martyrological representations as perlocutionary discursive practices through which the victim referred to is sacralized and its sacredness transferred to the oppressed community. Second, as suggested by Weigel, the consolidation and diffusion of martyr figures is directly proportional to the amount and serial production of martyrological representations. The reproduction of the figure in the media increases its performativity. This means that to understand martyrdom it is not enough to analyze it as an *act of bodily self-sacrifice*; it is also necessary to analyze the *serial representation* of an event of violence *as* an act of martyrdom. The focus thus moves from the attitudes and subjective intentions of social actors to the mechanisms of production and reproduction of martyr figurations.

But there is an element that Fierke's and Weigel's theoretical models seem unable to integrate and explain: the emergence of the state martyr figure. Both understand the martyr figure as a counterpart of the sovereign, since they focus on martyrs from communities without political legitimation or, more precisely, communities whose legitimacy is questioned by so-called sovereign states. The case of the martyrological representation of Aldo Moro reveals a completely different situation, a kind of exception, which is difficult to explain with these two theoretical frameworks. First, Aldo Moro wrote on several occasions that he had no intention of sacrificing himself for the national community and thus refused the

32 Fierke 2013, 48.

allocation of the state martyr role. Fierke's model of explanation does not seem to be adequate in analyzing the martyrological representation of Aldo Moro for the simple reason that her study focuses on willing martyrs. Second, Weigel and Fierke do not seem to consider the possibility that acts of violence perpetrated by non-state organizations may be directed against representatives of the sovereign power and that the consecutive death of a holder of political authority may be represented as a form of martyrdom. Third, there is a problem concerning Fierke's distinction between two different and separate language games, according to which martyrdom is always somehow an appeal to human rights, while established political authorities always refer to the discourse of national security. In fact, as we will see, the Italian government, major political parties and the established media argued that Aldo Moro had to sacrifice himself and accept his role as a state martyr in order to save the Italian State and its institutions. Conversely, Aldo Moro argued that it was iniquitous to sacrifice him with the argument of national security, because the state had the duty to preserve every single human life. We are therefore faced with a very strange situation: Moro was represented as a state martyr, whose death was necessary to safeguard national security. The situation is even more complicated, because the choice of not dealing with the Red Brigades to obtain the release of Moro was justified with the argument that the Italian State could not deal with terrorists, because they endangered the safety of the citizens. In other words, Moro had to sacrifice himself to ensure that the state could continue to defend human rights. Fourth, in the case of Aldo Moro, the figure of the martyr operates both as a political body of the community—the people of the Italian Republic—as well as a legitimizing figure of dominant power structures and relations.

In a recent publication, Paul Middleton presents some general reflections on martyrdom, which can help shed some light on the phenomenon of state martyrology. He perfectly sums up the role of political purposes in the cultural processes of the «creation» of martyrs as well as their contestation:

Religious, political, and even academic theological accounts of martyrdom today function primarily as identity markers which reinforce religious, cultural, national and even trans-national group boundaries. The distinction between a «martyr» and a «terrorist» is the difference between two stories; [...] Martyrologies still function as a means of creating group identity, through sympathy or rejection of particular martyrs; martyrology demands people take sides. [...] Martyrs can be appropriated or even «created» in order to legitimate religious or political

causes [...] Significantly, this can be the case whether or not the <martyr> intended to die for that cause, or even counted themselves among the movement which goes on to celebrate their martyr status. [...] Martyrologies can be created independently of the particular convictions of the <martyr>. [...] In the end, martyrdom cannot be defined; martyrdom is what martyrdom does; a narrative that creates or maintains group identity, by holding up an ideal representative of the community, who chose to or is made to die for its values.³³

Thus, according to Middleton, martyrs can even be created when there is no intentionality of self-sacrifice. This means that, in some cases, martyr figures can be constructed *only* through the serial and repetitive representation of events of violence as martyrdoms, which is exactly what happened with Aldo Moro. In the case of the Christian Democrat politician, it makes no sense to speak of an act of self-sacrifice, since we know that Moro rejected self-sacrifice «in the name of an abstract principle of legality.»³⁴ It is thus only and exclusively through language and discourse that the victim was sacralized and through which its sacredness was transferred to the national community.

3.2 *Sacrifice, Scapegoat, Martyrdom*

Sacrifice, from the Latin *sacrificium* (*sacer*, «holy»; *facere*, «to make»), carries the connotation of a religious act that sanctifies or consecrates an object. *Offering* is often used as a synonym (or as a more inclusive category in which sacrifice is a subdivision) and means the presentation of a gift (Latin *offerre*, «to offer, present»). Romance languages contain words derived from both Latin words. The German *Opfer* is generally understood as a word deriving from *offerre*, but some derive it from the Latin *operari* («to perform, accomplish»). Some scholars have tried to distinguish between offering and sacrifice, such as for example the cultural anthropologist Jan van Baal, who defines offering as «every act of presenting something to a supernatural being» and sacrifice as «an offering accompanied by the ritual killing of the object of the offering.»³⁵ This definition can be criticized as too narrow, however, «since <killing> is applied only to living beings, human or an-

33 Middleton 2014, 128–130.

34 Moro 2008b, 8; it.: «[...] in nome di un astratto principio di legalità.»

35 van Baal 1976, 161.

imal, and thus does not cover the whole range of objects used in sacrifice as attested by the history of religions.»³⁶ Nevertheless, The *Encyclopedia of Religion* indicates three essential elements of sacrifice, which are somehow present in van Baal's definition: sacrifice as a gift or a payment to some supernatural or transcendent entities; destruction, which can be applied both to unanimated objects and to living beings; the removing of something from a human's disposal, which is transferred to the supernatural or transcendent recipient. In a general morphology or topology of sacrifice, the *Encyclopedia* distinguishes between the sacrificer (or offerer), the sacrificed material, the praxis or rite of sacrifice, the place and time of sacrifice, the recipient of sacrifice and the intention of sacrifice.

For a long time, scholars have tried to develop theories on the origin of sacrifice. In *Primitive Culture: Research Into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, published in 1871, Edward Burnett Taylor argues that sacrifice was originally a simple business transaction of *do ut des* («I give so that you will give in return»). The English anthropologist supposes that «higher» forms of religion, including monotheism, gradually developed out of animism as the «earliest» form. According to Taylor, sacrifice as abnegation or renunciation developed only gradually from the practices of making gifts to spirits resident in nature, gifts through which the spirits could be bribed; but even when it was developed, Taylor argues, the *do ut des* idea continued to be operative for a long time in the later stages of religion.

18 years later, William Robertson Smith developed a theory of sacrifice for the Semitic world, which he regarded as universally applicable, in his masterpiece *Lectures On the Religion Of the Semites*. Here, he criticizes Taylor's theory for not paying sufficient attention to the function of sacrificial practices, which according to him was the establishment or maintenance of social community. Assuming that the shared core of the earliest forms of religion (among the Semites and elsewhere) was the belief in a theriomorphic tribal divinity with which the tribe had a blood relationship, Smith defines sacrifice as a ritual communal meal in which a totemic animal (which under ordinary circumstances was not to be killed) was slain and eaten in order to renew the community. According to Smith, in this ritual the recipient, offerers and victims were all of the same nature; therefore, sacrifice was originally a meal in which the offerers entered into communion with the totem.

36 Henninger 2005, 7997.

In their famous *Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice*, published in 1898, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss reject both Taylor's and Smith's attempts to develop a theory of sacrifice, arguing that their mistake was the attempt to identify the essence of sacrifice by searching for its origin in ancient and primitive cultures. The problem with Taylor's theory is that «this theory described accurately the phases of the moral development of the phenomenon» but «it did not account for its mechanism», while «the great flaw in [Smith's] system is that it seeks to bring the multiplicity of sacrificial forms within the unity of an arbitrarily chosen principle.»³⁷ According to Hubert and Mauss, Smith's theory arbitrarily chooses totemism as a universally applicable point of departure and reconstructs the development of the forms of sacrifice solely by analogy and without adequate historical basis. In particular, Hubert and Mauss criticize Smith for claiming to establish a historical sequence and a logical derivation between the communion sacrifice and other kinds of sacrifice. Instead of deriving all forms of sacrifice from one «original» communion sacrifice, they want to demonstrate that «the expulsion of a sacred spirit, whether pure or impure, is a primordial component of sacrifice, as primordial and irreducible as communion.»³⁸ Hubert and Mauss summarize their thesis with the famous formula, according to which

Sacrifice is a religious act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it or that of a certain object with which he is concerned.³⁹

The victim is not holy by nature, as it is in Smith's theory. Rather, the consecration is effected by destruction, and the connection with the sacral world is completed by a sacred meal. Implied here is the view (which returns to Émile Durkheim) of the French sociological school that the sacral world is simply a projection of society. Ultimately, Hubert and Mauss consider the recipient of sacrifice to be simply a hypostatization of society itself.

The idea that the consecration of the sacrificial object is obtained by its destruction deeply influenced theories of martyrdom. This is true not only for Samuel Klausner's definition of martyrdom, but also for Fierke's conceptualization of martyrdom as an act of self-sacrifice—that is, the destruction of one's own body—, through which the sacrificed self becomes sa-

37 Hubert/Mauss 1964, 2, 5.

38 Hubert/Mauss 1964, 6.

39 Hubert/Mauss 1964, 13.

cred and with him the community to which the martyr belongs. The same can be said of Weigel's understanding of martyrdom, who, referring explicitly to Hubert and Mauss, argues:

If, in the case of the archaic or pagan sacrifice, in whose ritual the gift to the gods is sanctified, the moral change of the sacrificer [*des Opfern-den*] goes hand in hand with the transformation of the sacrificed [*des Opfers/Geopferten*] into something sacred, a radical change comes into play with the martyr. For here, it is one and the same person who is killed or kills himself, and who, at the same time, becomes sacred and undergoes the moral transformation that predisposes this person to become a saint.⁴⁰

I believe that this way of conceiving either the sacrificial ritual, in which a sacrificer destroys an object other than himself or herself, or martyrdom, in which the agent of sacrifice and the person sacrificed are the same, is highly problematic because it is based on the silent premise that sacralization or consecration is *primarily* the result of ritual practice. Though Fierke and Weigel recognize the fundamental role of language, rhetoric and discourse in the construction (and contestation) of martyr figurations, they still think of the function and performativity of martyrdom in ritualistic terms. But, as the case of Aldo Moro perfectly exemplifies, there can be situations in which sacralization is achieved only by means of discursive practices—that is, when an event of violence is represented linguistically, rhetorically and narratively *as* a ritual, a sacrifice, a form of martyrdom. I do not want to say that ritual practices do not have a sacralizing function—the history of religion is full of such rituals. What I am saying is, in fact, very simple: no sacrifice or martyrdom has performative efficacy unless it is supported by a mythical narrative and that, in the absence of a ritual, it is possible to sacralize a person, to *produce the sacred*, with only the aid of what we can define as *discursively constructed mythology*.

There is a second reason why I am very skeptical of the attempt to conceive sacralization or consecration as the outcome of a ritual act, in which an object or a person must be sacrificed. I suspect that behind this theorization lies a universalistic conception, according to which human social life is governed by man's natural disposition toward aggressiveness, which results in a certain cyclical, eternal return to violence. The idea of an intrinsic and therefore universal relationship between sacrifice, sacralization and violence, which, in my opinion, implicitly operates in the theory of Hu-

40 Weigel 2007b, 26.

bert and Mauss, is the core of René Girard's thought. In fact, for Girard, who tries to combine Hegel's analysis of the dialectic struggle for recognition and Nietzsche's notion of *ressentiment*, each human being is driven by desire for what others have or want. He calls this «mimetic desire».⁴¹ This causes a triangulation of desire and results in conflict between the desiring parties. This mimetic contagion increases to a point where society is at risk, and it is at this point that the scapegoat mechanism is triggered. This is the point where one person is singled out as the cause of the trouble and therefore expelled or killed by the group. Social order is restored in people's contentment that they have eliminated the cause of their problems by removing the scapegoated individual; and then the cycle begins again.

Despite Girard criticizes «the formalistic tradition of Hubert and Mauss», arguing that their problem is in the belief that «sacrificial rites have no basis in reality», his scapegoat theory reproduces their idea of sacralization as the outcome of ritualized destruction, that is, violence.⁴² The main problem here is not the definition of sacrificial practices as a ritualized form of violence—a definition that, when the sacrificial object is a living being, can hardly be denied—but in the idea that this ritualized violence is necessary for the establishment and perpetuation of social order. This idea is also at the basis of the Girardian conception of martyrdom. In fact, the French Catholic scholar understands myth and gospel as two rival descriptions of the social process of violent persecution. In the Gospels and Christian martyrologies, he argues, the perspective that prevails is not that of the community, but that of the oppressed victim. This allows him to expose his specific secularized Christian conception of history: «throughout occidental history persecutory representations (myths) have lost their effectiveness. For Girard, our contemporary recognition of the victim's innocence [...] is ultimately a radicalized intensification of our solidarity with the martyrs—which in turn derives from our immersion in the story of Christ's Passion.»⁴³ This conception of martyrdom as a radical rejection of violence history is only apparently similar to that of Walter Benjamin and Jacob Taubes, which I discussed in the previous chapter. Indeed, starting from the premise that violence is a natural disposition of man, Girard comes to regard state repressive apparatuses as necessary tools for the containment of violence:

41 See Girard 1979, 143–168.

42 Girard 1979, 6–7.

43 Kirwan 2009, 920.

The elimination of sacrificial violence is not just *good* or *bad*; it is an ambivalent and ambiguous progress in the fight against violence, which may include regressive moments when humans, who in the past were being held back by this violence, become more violent. The peace we have enjoyed until recently is often based on sacrificial violence, which is obviously no longer present in the form of blood sacrifice, but which exists in institutions such as the police, the army, the dominance of American power, which still instills respect around the world.⁴⁴

Ultimately, Girard has a political-theological understanding of history similar to that of Thomas Hobbes and Carl Schmitt. Since, in the state of nature, human beings live in a permanent *«war of all against all»*, the monopoly of violence by the state assumes the connotation of something absolutely necessary to restrain the omnipresent threat of the apocalypse. In such a world, the sacrifice of innocents is, however tragic, inevitable. In Girard's thinking, the martyrdoms of those who imitate Jesus Christ are human attempts to imitate the divine, that is, something that is radically metaphysical and metahistorical:

What Jesus calls us to imitate is his desire, it is the momentum that directs him toward the goal he has set: to be more like the Father. [...] His only purpose is to become the perfect image of God. Christ therefore commits with the utmost zeal to imitating this God who is his Father. Inviting us to imitate him, he invites us to imitate his own imitation.⁴⁵

The crucial point is that, for Girard, martyrdom is the imitation of something that is not human, since humans are predisposed by nature to mimetic desire. In this way, martyrdom assumes a metaphysical connotation, where both violence and non-violence are depoliticized, because the first is placed in the sphere of nature while the second is located in the domain of the divine sphere; the human being is therefore imprisoned between these two poles. Despite saying the opposite, Girard ultimately does not consider martyrological representations to be instruments of political struggle against sovereign power, but to be human attempts to overcome *«natural»* guilt: the guilt of being an animal who desires mimetically.

44 Girard 2011, 24.

45 Girard 2001, 27.

To counteract these two theoretical problems—the conception that sacralization is primarily the result of ritual destruction and the anthropological premises underlying it—I propose to take inspiration from Giorgio Agamben's theory of the *homo sacer*. According to the Italian philosopher, the sacralization or consecration of human beings is the result of the praxis of excluding them from the community, a ban through which life is depoliticized and reduced to «bare life». Marcel Mauss drew attention to the *homo sacer* figure in his first study of sociology of religion, published in 1896.⁴⁶ In this text, he points out that, in ancient Rome, not only was what belonged to the gods of the city sacred, but so was what the individual granted to the gods. In other words, everything withdrawn from common usage was sacred. The main distinction here between *res sacra* and *res communes* is that what belonged to the gods could not belong to men, and vice versa. Thus, if something was consecrated to the gods, it belonged definitively to the sphere of the sacred. This could also affect people. In fact, the Roman penal code prescribed that the chief priest could consecrate a criminal to the gods before the altar and in the presence of the people. The *consecratio capitis et bonorum*, Mauss claims, was both a religious and legal practice, and only later, through the historical development of criminal law, did the distinction between public law and religious law emerge. In an important passage, Mauss writes that «l'homme devenu *sacer* était voué à la mort. Tout citoyen avait le droit de le tuer, de détruire sa propriété, son troupeau» [«the man who had become *sacer* was doomed to death. Every citizen had the right to kill him, to destroy his property, his flock»].⁴⁷ Agamben, although he does not explicitly mention Mauss' essay, resumes the argument traced by the French anthropologist and proposes «to interpret *sacratio* as an autonomous figure», which «may allow us to uncover an originary *political* structure that is located in a zone prior to the distinction between sacred and profane, religious and juridical.»⁴⁸ This originary structure is that of the sovereign exception, namely what allows the sovereign to suspend the law in the state of exception and to ban a person from the political community by consecrating that person to the gods. To consecrate someone means nothing more than to permit someone to be killed without such killing being considered a murder, that is to say, without the killing being prosecuted and punished by law:

46 See Mauss 1896a; Mauss 1896b.

47 Mauss 1896b, 59.

48 Agamben 1998, 74.

The sovereign sphere is the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice, and sacred life—that is, life that may be killed but not sacrificed—is the life that has been captured in this sphere.⁴⁹

According to Agamben, this practice of consecration—the sovereign decision through which an individual is deprived of his or her social and political life and reduced to «bare life»—«is the originary activity of sovereignty.»⁵⁰

Unlike Hubert and Mauss (in the *Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice* there is no reference to the figure of the *homo sacer*, which is why we are led to believe that Mauss had dropped the intuition he had had two years before), Agamben conceives consecration not exclusively as the result of religious ritual performances, but of practices of exclusion, which are both juridical–political and religious. Furthermore, this consecration is achieved not only by means of ritualized practices of exclusion, but also and especially through discursive practices of *declaring* that someone is already sacred and thus killable without punishment. Thus, it is not only through ritual acts performed with the body, but also through discursive practices performed by iterating language units, rhetoric patterns and narrative models, that consecration is produced. In other words, the success of consecration is related to the ritualization of both corporal and discursive practices—that is, the repetition of actions and representations that were established and promoted over time.

It is clear that Agamben's *homo sacer* theory does not have the universal claim of explaining the function of all kinds of sacrificial practices in any historical and pragmatic hermeneutic context, but rather considers the role of consecration within and in reference to what Foucault, as we have seen, defines as the discourse of sovereignty or the «politico-legendary history of the Romans». It is therefore in the context of Greek–Roman culture that consecration intended as a form of exclusion from the profane community of the living, that is, from the political and juridical spheres, must be placed. Thus, the *homo sacer* theory allows us to better understand and explain the intrinsic relationship between sovereignty and violence, between sovereign exception and the reduction of a human to bare life in the context of «Western» history, culture and society.⁵¹

49 Agamben 1998, 83.

50 Agamben 1998, 83.

51 As William Cavanaugh rightly observes, «the West is a construct, a contested project, not a simple description of a monolithic entity.» Here I use the term

At this point, the task is to understand the relationship between the *homo sacer* figure and the martyr figure, to thus analyze the encounter, confrontation and mutual influence between the consecration of bare life through the sovereign practice of exclusion and sacralization through martyrological representations. In the next chapters, I will expose the heuristic value of the *homo sacer* theory for my analysis of the martyrological representation of Aldo Moro and, in broader terms, for understanding the state martyr figure's performativity. But before that it is necessary to first reconstruct the *history of the signatures* of the concept of martyrdom in order to understand how the martyr figure emerged in the encounter between the discourses of sovereignty and rebellion, between the «politico-legendary history of the Romans» and the «mythico-religious discourse of the Jews».

Signature is a *terminus technicus* of discourse analysis.⁵² It broadens the interpretative horizon that makes it possible to observe how signs and concepts change meaning over time. In this sense, it marks a breaking point between semiology and hermeneutics. Semiology is what allows the identification of signs, while hermeneutics discovers their meaning in a particular historical, political, social and cultural context. A central task of this study is to reconstruct the history of the martyr's signatures and in particular to demonstrate that, on the threshold between the Middle Ages and modernity and with the emergence and constitution of modern national states, the martyr figure underwent a signature through which it was transposed from the pragmatic and hermeneutic context of Christian religion (and theology) to a secular (and political) one.

From this point of view, the emergence of the figure of the state martyr is a product or result of secularization. In fact, in line with Agamben, secularization can be regarded as a process of dislocation of signs and concepts from the sacred to the profane sphere of meaning. Signatures play an important strategic role: they direct the interpretation of signs in a certain direction. The central idea is that some religious language forms, which in modernity and post-modernity are used in profane and secular contexts and discourses, have a *secret index*: they recall previous religious meanings without making them explicit.⁵³ Among these secularized religious lan-

«Western» in the same way as Cavanaugh uses it, namely as an ideological construct which is both *made* and *shaped* by certain narratives and forms of representation. Just like the «myth of religious violence» analyzed by Cavanaugh, state martyrology should be understood as «an ideological accompaniment to shifts in Western configurations of power.» See Cavanaugh 2009, 7, 12.

52 See Foucault 1966, 44; Agamben 2009, 33–80.

53 See Agamben 2011, 3–4.

guage forms there is the figure of the martyr or, more precisely, there are the signs, images, and the rhetorical and narrative structures through which the figure of the martyr takes shape and manifests itself in a new semiotic, pragmatic and hermeneutic context.

The phenomenon of the formation of analogies, the transfer, resetting or reversal of religious language into new contexts, can also be conceptualized, in line with Hans Blumenberg, as a *prefiguration*.⁵⁴ According to the German philosopher, prefiguration is an anthropologically derivable process that consists in reducing the complexity of reality by iterating past forms of representation, narrative models, and rhetorical patterns in order to reduce contingency and create meaningfulness (*Bedeutsamkeit*). Prefigurations are «acts of repetition» (*Akte der Wiederholung*), by which actions or events are made plausible and significant by relating them to the characteristics, power and meaning attributed to historical or mythical actions or events.⁵⁵ The success of such meaningful analogies is *de facto* determined by both the conciseness and the contextual applicability of the reference figures. Prefiguration «does» something only through its concrete appearance in a particular pragmatic and hermeneutic context. It is a practice which iterates a certain past event or action and transposes the meaning or efficacy attributed to it in its «original» context to another event or action.

The performativity of the martyr figure is strongly linked to what Hans Blumenberg calls the «aesthetic potential of secularized [religious] language».⁵⁶ In *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, the German philosopher quotes Friedrich Schleiermacher's aphorism, according to which «Christianity produced language. It has been and still is a potentiated linguistic genius [*Sprachgeist*] from the beginning [...]».⁵⁷ Referring to this aphorism, Blumenberg argues that «the phenomena of secularization derives to a large extent from this linguistic genius, from the familiarities that it produced, the transferable materials that it left behind it, and the residual needs that are associated with its materials.»⁵⁸ There are certain signs, concepts and statements that deploy a specific form of performativity with a specific power of persuasion by referring to a religious «linguistic genius», to residues of religious signification. According to Blumenberg, secularized religious language has a «rhetorical function», which is that «of

54 See Blumenberg 2014b.

55 Blumenberg 2014b, 9.

56 Blumenberg 1985, 108.

57 Schleiermacher 2012, 17.

58 Blumenberg 1985, 114.

evoking effects along the spectrum between provocation and familiarity by means of an emphatic display of the terminology's marks of derivation».⁵⁹

In line with the arguments of both Agamben and Blumenberg, this investigation is based on the assumption that a critical analysis of the figure of the martyr and its performativity cannot help but consider its historical roots and transformations. What is the «original» meaning of the figure of the martyr, and what is its secret index? In order to avoid any misunderstanding, I wish to underline that I am not arguing that there is a genuine, true meaning of martyrdom, which has remained unchanged for centuries. That would mean a return to a dangerous form of essentialism. My goal is not to detect an inexistent essential meaning, but to trace the «cultural and medial metamorphosis» of the martyr figure in history.⁶⁰

3.3 Emergence of the Martyr Figure

In what social, political and cultural context did the martyr figure emerge for the first time in history? The question of the origin of martyrdom has been a controversial research topic for a long time and even today the debate seems to be far from coming to an end. There are two basic approaches to the question. On the one hand, there are researchers who are interested in determining the origin of the idea of martyrdom, namely in understanding in what social, political and cultural contexts the *idea* of a voluntary form of martyrdom, considered positive, desirable or «noble», could be developed. On the other hand, there are researchers for whom martyrdom begins at the moment when ancient Christians started using the *term* martyrdom to describe a person who chooses to suffer death rather than renounce faith in Christ or obedience to his teachings.⁶¹

We find this last kind of approach both in Norbert Brox's classic study *Zeuge und Märtyrer* and in the more recent study *Martyrdom and Rome* by Glen Bowersock. Both trace the evolution of the term from its pre-Christian use in courtrooms to its titular use in Christianity. Originally, the Greek word μάρτυς meant «witness» in a trial. The word «was part of the forensic and legal language of Greek court», but it could also be used metaphorically for all kinds of observations and attestations. It thus never

59 See Blumenberg 1985, 104–105.

60 Weigel 2007b, 16.

61 See Moss 2012, 2.

designated «dying for a cause» until the mid-second century AD.⁶² Resuming a thesis already present in Brox's study, Bowersock argues that the *concept* of martyrdom was alien to the ancient world and criticizes those researchers who consider, for example, the death of Socrates, the three Jews in the fiery furnace of Nebuchadnezzar, or the Maccabees, earlier forms of martyrdom.⁶³ According to Bowersock, «martyrdom, as we understand it, was conceived and devised in response to complex social, religious and political pressures», which took place from the second century onwards.⁶⁴

Many scholars criticize this kind of approach and instead point to ancient Jewish «antecedents» of Christian martyrdom. William Hugh Clifford Friend calls attention to forms of martyrdom found in Daniel and in the second and fourth books of the Maccabees, claiming that «without Maccabees and without Daniel, a Christian theology of martyrdom would scarcely have been possible.»⁶⁵ The «martyrdoms» of Eleazar (2 Maccabees 6–7), who is killed for refusing to eat pork, and of the seven brothers tortured and killed when each refused to abandon the ancestral laws, are often addressed as pre-Christian examples. In his study of the Maccabean martyrs, Jan Willem van Henten argues that the deaths of Jewish heroes for the salvation of their people formed the notion of martyrdom in the early Church.⁶⁶ Also, Middleton argues that the «pattern of refusal to compromise religious belief in the face of an edict and then torture is common to both Jewish and Christian martyr acts», which is why «the novelty of the technical *μάρτυς* vocabulary is less significant than Bowersock claims.»⁶⁷ The tradition of «noble-death» in Greco-Roman literature and culture is also often addressed as an antecedent of Christian martyrology. Scholars highlight that, in fact, early Christian writers praised pagan suicides as forerunners of martyrdom.⁶⁸ Candida R. Moss shows, on the basis of many examples of «noble deaths» (Homeric heroes, Antigone, Lucrezia, Socrates, etc.), how the memory of pre-Christian heroic suicides acts as a reference for the creation of martyr figures in the second and third centuries, stressing that, «when interpreting their own experiences and their own concept

62 Moss 2012, 4.

63 See Baumeister 1980; Musurillo 1954.

64 Bowersock 2002, 5.

65 Friend 1965, 65.

66 See van Henten 1997.

67 Middleton 2014, 121.

68 See Weigel 2007b, 22–24, Middleton 2014, 121; van Henten/Avemarie 2002, 1–8.

of martyrdom, early Christians, transformed, shaped, and subverted existing cultural tropes.»⁶⁹

Although there are undoubtedly Greek–Roman and ancient Jewish influences, I agree with Brox’s and Bowersock’s thesis, according to which the martyr figure emerged for the first time in the second century. In fact, there are substantial differences between the martyr figure and the tradition of death for faith in the Jewish context or of the noble death in the Greco-Roman context. In both traditions, death was a sign of virtue: «the willingness to die proved the purity of one’s intentions and served as a guarantor of the veracity of one’s claims.»⁷⁰ Undoubtedly, in the Jewish context, death also had the connotation of «dying for God»;⁷¹ but the *act of dying* was not conceived and represented as an *act of witnessing faith* before the mid-second century AD. Bowersock points out that, even in the New Testament, the word *μάρτυς* is used only to denote a spectator or eyewitness, one who testifies to what he has seen.⁷² However, there is no doubt that within the New Testament the act of witnessing assumes a different connotation. The word continues to denote the act of witnessing something verbally (or the person who is a witness to something), but what is being witnessed now has a transcendent and metaphysical value. In the Gospels, particularly in the Acts of the Apostles, the word *μάρτυρες* is used to designate those who witnessed Jesus’ suffering and especially those who witnessed his resurrection (see, for example, Luke 24:48 and Acts 1:22, 2:32, 3:15). What is witnessed is thus no longer the truth of a historical fact, as in the case of something witnessed before a trial, but of an absolute truth. The earliest appearance of these words, referring to death at the hands of a hostile authority, is in the *Martyrium polycarpi*, which describes the events connected with the execution of the elderly bishop of Smyrna, a town in western Asia Minor, around the year 150.

This new meaning of the term «martyrdom», namely «to die for a cause», is therefore a product of late antiquity. It gradually took shape in the second century and «had been an essentially urban manifestation of Christian zeal»; in fact, «martyrdom in a city provided the greatest possible visibility for the cause of the nascent Church, and it simultaneously exposed the Ro-

69 Moss 2012, 47.

70 Moss 2012, 47.

71 Weigel 2007b, 24.

72 According to Bowersock, the only passage in the entire New Testament «that might have effectively encouraged the sense of martyrdom as it was to develop» is Acts 22:20, where Paul refers to the stoning of Stephen with the words: «when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed». See Bowersock 2002, 15.

man administrative machinery to the greatest possible embarrassment.»⁷³ What happened in the second century was not a simple renomination of a social phenomenon that did not change over time. In the Greek cities of Asia Minor, Bowersock identified the necessary context for the genesis of the phenomenon of Christian martyrdom. Martyrdom could occur only if a Roman magistrate chose to impose the death penalty on a confessing Christian. From this point of view, the apparatus of Roman court procedures, along with their technical language, was a *conditio sine qua non* for the emergence of martyr figurations. This is why the first martyrological narratives had a common narrative structure that reproduced the fundamental steps of Roman court procedure.⁷⁴ For the whole duration of the martyr's trial large parts of the population were present:

The whole drama unfolded in the conspicuous places of a city. The martyr was moved from prison to tribunal, usually in the agora and close by the temple at which sacrifice to the emperor would be enjoined. The final scene was normally set in the amphitheater [...]. Martyrdom served as a catalyst of the intellectual and social rituals of the city by holding a mirror to the traditional functions of the agora and the amphitheater as well as to the urban environment to which they belonged—prison, temple, and brothel. Furthermore, crowds were an essential part of the martyrdoms, and these could only be mustered in sufficient numbers in the big cities.⁷⁵

It is in this context (and under the influence of the ethics of suicide modeled on the paradigm of Greek–Roman tradition) that «an ideology of death to promote a cause» was born.⁷⁶ Of course, voluntary death, understood as suicide, was soon harshly criticized by Church fathers (particularly by Clement of Alexandria and Origen), and the concept of martyrdom again assumed, in its theological interpretation, the meaning of «bearing witness», in the sense of a confession of faith in God: to die as a martyr means, then, to witness the truth of Christ's death and resurrection—martyrdom as *imitatio Christi*. Despite this reinterpretation or re-signification, the idea of martyrdom as a sort of «bodily performance» remained. During the second century, the public death of members of the Christian sect *became* the act of witnessing the transcendent and absolute truth embodied

73 Bowersock 2002, 42.

74 See Lanata 1973.

75 Bowersock 2002, 52, 55.

76 Bowersock 2002, 74.

by Christ. Through the signature of the word «martyrdom»—that is, the transposition of the term from a legal and forensic context into a religious one—public events of violence acquired a new, metaphysical meaning. This signature strongly determined attribution of meaning to events of political violence in which someone was tortured or killed. Dying (in certain circumstances) became an act of witnessing the truth of the Christian faith, or, more specifically, the truth of Christ's death and resurrection.

Candida R. Moss, despite assuming a less radical position, underlines the importance of this re-signification:

Even if the shift in the term's meaning does not mark the beginning of martyrdom itself, the refinement of language and the application of titles as identity markers are important historical developments. These moments of transition reveal changes in the structures of ancient social and conceptual hierarchies.⁷⁷

One of the most important changes lies in the fact that, through the representation of violent death in the public space as «martyrdom», an ideology was promoted which was strongly subversive. In classical Rome, sacrificing one's life for one's family or community was considered honorable, but, as Carlin Barton notes, «Romans rarely identified with or wanted to be seen as victims [...]. Their stories of the vindication of honor are designed not to elicit pity, not to reveal a victim, but to reveal an unconquered will.»⁷⁸ Early Christians were undoubtedly influenced by these attitudes, but they understood themselves as part of a community of believers. If, within Roman culture, spectacles of death were intended to deprive criminals of their honor through stripping them of agency, Christians appeared to have chosen to die and their deaths were represented as acts of witnessing the truth of Christ's revelation. Martyrs assumed the meaning of fully active citizens of the city of God. Furthermore, the *Acta martyrum* «ensured that these performances were not only remembered but individualized as acts of personal self-expression. Martyrdom was, in these accounts, an act [...] legitimized by the example of the Passion of Christ.»⁷⁹ In the same way that, according to Pauline theology, Christ was considered the symbolic body of the Church (and vice versa), the martyrs, as imitators of Christ in death, were experienced as being the same symbolic body. The martyr, we can say, assumed the meaning of one who re-actualized the mystical bond

77 Moss 2012, 6.

78 Barton 2002, 27.

79 Janes/Houen 2014, 5.

between Christ and the community.⁸⁰ In eschatological terms, it can be said that the figure of the martyr also had a legitimizing function. The Christian martyr figure, by witnessing the death of Christ with his own death, also bore witness to the future establishment of the city of God. In this way, it delegitimized the authority of the Roman Empire.⁸¹

The martyr figure, in the first context in which it appeared, was part of what in the second chapter I define as a narrative of rebellion. Moreover, the opposition proposed by Foucault between the «mythical–religious discourse of the Jews» and the «politico-legendary history of the Romans» here becomes clearer and more intelligible. In fact, what Middleton calls the «radical martyrdom» of early Christianity seems to be the encounter/clash of these two discourses.⁸² The martyr figure maintained subversive potential as long as it was inscribed within an eschatological and messianic narrative structure. This structure emerged historically for the first time in apocalyptic literature and was consolidated in the messianic narrative of Christianity. Apocalyptic and messianic thought developed in the historical context of conflicts between conquerors and the conquered, first under the Macedonian Empire of Alexander the Great, and then under the Roman Empire, and strongly influenced the cultural, religious and political history of late ancient world.

The novelty of the Christian messianic narrative lies not in the vision of a coming Kingdom of God, which already existed in the apocalyptic and eschatological narratives that preceded it, but in the idea that the Kingdom will soon be realized or even that it has already been realized. In the Gospels, the apostles are the *martyrs*, namely those who *witnessed* the life and death of Christ (the Messiah) as the revelation/realization of God's Kingdom. In further development of the narrative, the Messiah himself became the martyr, the *witness*, who by dying revealed/realized the Kingdom and the *accuser*, who delegitimizes not only the authority of the Roman emperors, but all forms of earthly authority. In the second century, martyrdom became, through the signature of the Greek word μάρτυς and in the context of struggle between Christian communities and the Roman Empire, an act of witnessing through death, which unmasked and exposed the iniquity of the violence perpetuated by the political authority. Christ was understood as a τύπος (type or pre-figure) of the martyr who died in this struggle. It is a typological analogy, similar to the analogy used by Paul

80 See Rahner 1958, 91.

81 See Recupero 2010, 24.

82 Middleton 2006.

when he says that Adam was «a type [τύπος] of the one who was to come», that is, of Christ. The Christ-martyr thus assumed the connotation of the archetypal martyr, to which every form of Christian martyrology refers.⁸³

The eschatological and messianic narrative radically challenged the Greco-Roman way of conceiving and narrating politics and of glorifying power. The Romans saw a threat to the stability and social peace of the Empire in the behavior of Christians, because it undermined the very essence on which the acknowledgment and legitimization of political authority was based. Religion has always played an important role in the mechanisms of legitimization of the social and political structures of the ancient Roman civilization. Religion was closely associated with socio-political reality, for which a distinction between inner (religious) and public (political) spheres was inconceivable. Especially with the expansion of the Empire, when it was no longer possible to govern the masses through the institutions of the *polis*, the *princeps* as a leader had to monopolize all power. In this way, the *autoritas* passed to the *princeps* and the religious worshiping of the gods of the state culminated in the imperial cult. As Erik Peterson notes, the cult of the «old» state divinities could be tolerant, but the new imperial cult was necessarily intolerant, since the divine was now embodied by the figure of the emperor and demanded its own recognition as a *numen praesens*.⁸⁴ To refuse to worship the Roman deity or the divinities of the Empire and oppose the adoration of the emperor's image meant, for the authority and for Roman citizens, a lack of loyalty and a public demonstration of disavowal of the constituted power. That is why the main accusation of Christians was atheism, blasphemy, impiety, *crimen religionis*, *crimen majestatis*, which, though with different shades, indicated the same political problem: opposition to the official religion and therefore the rejection of established power structures and political authority.⁸⁵

The rejection of the «politico-legendary history of the Romans» by the early Christian communities was a radical act of political subversion and revolt. Hannah Arendt is right when she writes that «Christian morality [...] has always insisted that everybody should mind his own business and that political responsibility constituted first of all a burden, undertaken exclusively for the sake of the well-being and salvation of those it freed from worry about public affairs.»⁸⁶ However, this radical rejection of *vita activa*

83 See Recupero 2010, 22.

84 See Peterson 1937, 82.

85 See Noce 1987, 26.

86 Arendt 1998, 60.

—understood as the participation in public and political life—was in itself actually quite political. In fact, within the messianic and eschatological narrative, the distinction between private life and political life, between ζωή (natural life) and βίος πολιτικός (political life), was replaced with the Paulinian distinction between σῶμα ψυχικόν (physical body) and σῶμα πνευματικόν (spiritual body). The physical body is the one humanity shares with Adam, a body of the dust of the earth, while the spiritual body is what Christ acquired in his resurrection and that all those who belong to him will have in their future resurrection in heaven (1 Cor 15:47–48). Thus, the radical difference between the Greco-Roman and the Jewish-Christian ways of understanding man, society and the world cannot be emphasized enough. As Arendt argues,

the Christian «glad tidings» of the immortality of individual human life had reversed the ancient relationship between man and world and promoted the most mortal thing, human life, to the position of immortality, which up to then the cosmos had held. [...] It is precisely individual life which now came to occupy the position once held by the «life» of the body politic, and Paul's statement that «death is the wages of sin», since life is meant to last forever, echoes Cicero's statement that death is the reward of sins committed by political communities which were built to last for eternity. It is as though the early Christians—at least Paul, who after all was a Roman citizen—consciously shaped their concept of immortality after the Roman model, substituting individual life for the political life of the body politic.⁸⁷

The messianic and eschatological narrative desacralized the cosmos and sacralized individual life. According to Arendt, the Greco-Roman understanding of natural, private life, whose center was the home and family, was based on the idea that borders, the boundaries between one estate and another, were sacred. The sacrality of the household, which «was born of necessity», was radically different from «the realm of the polls», of political life, which «was the sphere of freedom». Freedom was thus located exclusively in the political and profane realm, while necessity was «primarily a prepolitical phenomenon», in which «force and violence are justified [...] because they are the only means to master necessity—for instance, by ruling over slaves—and to become free.»⁸⁸ Here, the status of the *homo sacer* becomes perhaps clearer: Within ancient Roman culture and society, *sacer*

87 Arendt 1998, 314.

88 Arendt 1998, 30–31.

3.4 Institutionalization, Militarization, and Nationalization of the Martyr Figure

was the human being that belonged to the gods, that is: someone who cannot act freely in the public and political sphere. The Christian messianic and eschatological narrative radically subverted this understanding of the relation of household to city, of freedom to necessity, by declaring that every individual life was free thanks to the resurrection of Christ, a prefiguration of the resurrection of all believers at the end of time. In Greco-Roman culture, a sacred individual was not free, inasmuch as his or her life belonged to the gods and thus was no longer subjected to the rules of the city; for early Christians, a sacred individual became free through his or her faith in the saving power of Christ' death and resurrection.

Now, we should be able to better understand the singularity of the situation in which the first martyrological narratives emerged. By refusing to recognize the official religion of the Empire, the first Christian communities endangered the entire conceptual and knowledge system, the hegemonic discourse on which imperial power was based. The martyrological representation of violent death at the hands of Roman magistrates was based on a mechanism of subversion of language, through which the term «martyrdom» assumed the meaning of a performance of the body with which an individual witnessed the truth of the revelation of a new, universal community in which every human being is free. From the point of view of a messianic and eschatological understanding of history, without which the martyr figure could never have emerged, the distinction between a legitimate and illegitimate use of violence itself made no sense, because there was no legitimate power in the world despite that of God.

3.4 Institutionalization, Militarization, and Nationalization of the Martyr Figure

Early Christian communities took possession of elements of Greco-Roman language and rhetoric, subverting their significance. The signature of the term martyrdom is a paradigmatic example of this very effective re-signification of language, through which the «original» meaning of terms did not disappear but rather assumed a different connotation, permitting a different usage. This subversive re-signification did not have a long life, inasmuch as the subversive potential of the martyr figure was soon disempowered by a further re-signification that occurred during the historical process that led to the institutionalization of the Christian religion. After Constantine, the institutions of the Empire and the Christian Church were increasingly intertwined. The Christian Church mirrored the centralized imperial bu-

reocracy when it stabilized its structure and hierarchy. The imperial and Christian administrative structures coincided, and soon religious leaders also adopted civilian roles. In this changed cultural, social and institutional context, a cult of martyrs developed whose main function was to legitimize the new political and administrative structure of the Empire. The center of worship of the martyrs was the (real or fictional) places of their burials. In these places, monuments of different types, from simple memorial stones up to sumptuous sanctuaries, were erected.⁸⁹

The term μαρτύριον thus underwent further re-signification. It was then used to indicate sanctuaries and reliquaries built on the remains of martyrs. These μαρτύρια increasingly functioned as symbols of God's victory over the enemy, the moment of the heavenly triumph. As Maria Grazia Recupero observes, these places served as spatial markers that legitimized the hierarchy of urban administration: «The increasingly decisive role of bishops—the main holders of public functions in the city of the 4th century—merges with the progressive organization, institutionalization, and administration of the cult of martyrs.»⁹⁰ Martyrs were considered mediators between the community and the sacred, between the inside and the outside, that is, as intercessors between earthly and divine power. Around the martyrs' sanctuaries, a new form of political legitimization developed based on the glorification and acclamation of a political power and hierarchy that participated in the martyrs' sacredness. The figure of the martyr thus became the point of reference, the fulcrum on which practices of acclamation and the glorification of power revolved, practices which, as we have seen, were typical of imperial society and culture.

Martyrological language was then used to describe a life of spiritual discipline and asceticism: «martyrdom could become democratized, everyone could participate. [...] Just as martyrdom had produced heroes of who had displayed acts of extreme courage and endurance, so asceticism could be taken to an extraordinary level.»⁹¹ The martyr figure also served, after a long process of consolidation of the of martyr cult, to legitimate the concept of Christian Holy War. As observed by Adolf von Harnack in his famous study *Militia Christi*, from the beginning Christianity appropriated a military lexicon⁹², while systematic militarization of the martyrs occurred around the 10th and 11th centuries by aligning the exaltation of Christian

89 Pricoco 2007, 67.

90 Recupero 2010, 180.

91 Middleton 2011, 84.

92 See von Harnack 1905.

spirituality with military glory.⁹³ Within the Christian tradition, Augustine established rules that defined when it was justified to start a war (*jus ad bellum*) as well as what were legitimate and illegitimate forms of violence within war (*jus in bello*). According to him, war was legitimate when it was waged to obey divine command.⁹⁴ A number of Christian Holy Wars were waged against pagans between the seventh and ninth centuries by figures such as Charlemagne and the English kings St. Oswald and St. Edmund; both kings were venerated as martyrs. As Paul Middleton highlights, «once killing in battle was theologically justified as participation in Christian Holy War, it was only a small step before the dead in such conflicts were viewed as martyrs.»⁹⁵ Soldiers who fought in wars blessed by Pope Gregory VII were considered militia Christi insofar as they were seen as imitating the sacrifice of Christ.

The first Christians understood martyrdom as a spiritual conflict against Satan, who wanted to remove them from their confession through the instruments of torture inflicted by the Romans. Satan was considered the power behind every evil in the world, the one who with his continuous action was responsible for the emperor's idolatry and the violent and immoral bloody spectacles of the Romans. In particular, persecution was considered work carried out by emperors under the influence of Satan. In the context of Christian Holy Wars the understanding of Satan changed, since the martyr-warrior figure was understood as someone fighting against infidels. Satan was now understood not only as a force operating in the souls of all humans, but also as an entity that, through pagans and infidels, intended to destroy Christian society and kingdoms. The second Crusade preacher Bernard of Clairvaux assured crusaders that both killing and dying for God was not a sin, but something wanted by God: «The knights of Christ may safely do battle [...] as death for Christ, inflicted and endured, bears no taint of sin, but deserves abundant glory.»⁹⁶ A martyr was no longer someone who died by the hand of an illegitimate political authority, but a warrior who killed infidels and was willing to die in doing so.

Paul Middleton highlights the role of martyr figures in the context of the struggle between the Catholic Church and the Reformation movement. The same event of violence was interpreted and represented in opposite ways: some viewed it as the legitimate execution of a heretic, while oth-

93 See Recupero 2010, 13.

94 See Janes/Houen 2014, 9–10.

95 Middleton 2011, 86.

96 Quoted in Middleton 2011, 89.

ers represented it as the death of a martyr, as an act of bearing witness to the true doctrine and an accusation of the false church that fell into sin. Jan Hus, who was influenced by the teachings of John Wycliffe and whose work would influence Martin Luther, gave a «mass for martyrs», specifically for three men who were beheaded after a mob burned a papal bull in July 1402.⁹⁷ For Luther, the martyrdoms of those who were killed or injured due to their criticism of the Catholic Church were signs that the true Church was reborn. When two Augustinian friars were burned in Brussels in 1523, the Reformation movement gained its first martyrs. Through the production of martyrological representations, the Reformers could claim continuity with the past.

However, Luther himself criticized the Anabaptist movement and its own martyrological representations. While the two kingdoms doctrine of Lutherans and Calvinists *de facto* legitimized political authority as the necessary sword to restrain evil, according to Anabaptist theology there was no kingdom other than that of God. In 1525, the radical preacher Thomas Müntzer, who was foremost amongst those reformers criticizing Luther's compromises with feudal authority, was executed in the German Peasants' Revolt. When Luther was confronted with the deaths of Müntzer and other Anabaptists, he resorted to Augustine's adage: *non poena sed causa facit martyrem*. The deaths of Anabaptists were recalled in pamphlets and songs. From the mid-sixteenth century these martyrologies, such as the *Swiss Brethren Hymnal* (1564) and the famous Menonite *Martyrs' Mirror* (1660), were collected, edited and printed. Although both Catholics and Protestants were impressed by the manner of death assumed by Anabaptists, ultimately they justified their execution as a legitimate means in the fight against heresy.⁹⁸

Unlike Anabaptism, Protestantism spread quickly and quickly gained the support of princes; in many areas, civil authorities supported the new version of the faith. In the military, political and civil clashes that followed the confessional split of the Protestant from the English Reformations, the temporal and ecclesiastical political institutions lined the opposing fields of Protestantism and Catholicism, not only in terms of religious convictions but to also consolidate their political power and authority. In the context of the European wars of religion, thousands of Protestants were tried for heresy and burned at the stake, particularly in Germany, France, the Low Countries, and Switzerland. As Middleton highlights,

97 See Middleton 2011, 91.

98 See Middleton 2011, 96.

For the first time heretics were not isolated individuals, but comprised a mass movement of mutual support and encouragement, aided in no small measure by the printing press. Soon after the burning of the Augustinian monks in 1523, no fewer than sixteen editions of a martyrological pamphlet were in circulation, expressly calling the friars both saints and martyrs. Stories of martyrs, letters of exhortation, and sermons created a theology for a new age of martyrdom. Luther and Calvin both wrote to those in prison urging them to remain steadfast to the true faith, and follow the example laid down by the martyrs before them.⁹⁹

In these letters, the Passion of Christ, as well as the violent deaths of the early Christians, were represented as models to inspire acts of courage and self-sacrifice, while those that persecuted the Protestants were represented as demonic forces and compared to Roman emperors, such as Nero and Diocletian, and Satan.

According to Middleton, the most enduring martyrology of this time was John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. This book, published originally in 1563, was a direct response to the persecution of Protestants under Mary Tudor, who wanted to return England to Roman Catholicism. In the short reign of «Bloody Mary», more than 300 Protestants were executed. In the *Book of Martyrs*, Foxe represents Protestants as the true Church, the Roman Catholics as heirs of the ancient persecutors, and the Pope as a contemporary manifestation of evil analogous to the evil of Roman Emperors. When Mary Tudor died in 1558 and was replaced by Elisabeth I, English Protestants interpreted this as the work of God's hand: «The martyrs were vindicated. History repeated itself. As the persecuted Church became the religion of the Roman Empire, so with the dawning of a new age of security, Elizabeth was portrayed by Foxe as the new Constantine.»¹⁰⁰

During the period of the European wars of religion, martyrologies functioned to categorize Christians into martyrs, persecutors and heretics; ultimately, each religious denomination tried to connect its own beliefs and practices with the early Church. Each narrative reinforced the religious convictions of a martyr's group and served to accentuate the boundaries between competing movements. While the narratives of reformists' movements, such as the Anabaptists, iterated elements of the messianic and eschatological narratives of the first Christian communities, inasmuch as

99 Middleton 2011, 96-97.

100 Middleton 2011, 103.

they rejected recognizing and thus legitimizing any earthly political authority, most martyrologies were used to legitimize different political authorities and construct different collective identities. As Middleton points out, martyrologies have continued to serve as identity markers and as narratives of legitimization in the context of political struggle until the present day:

It is my contention that insights from the history of martyrology fatally undermine contemporary attempts to distinguish between ‹true› and ‹false› martyrs. Those religious, political, and even academic theological accounts of martyrdom today function primarily as identity markers that reinforce religious, cultural, national and even trans-national group boundaries. The distinction between ‹martyr› and ‹terrorist› is the difference between two stories.¹⁰¹

A good example of national martyrology is that which emerged in the context of the rebellion of the Scottish covenanters against the English monarchy. As Middleton argues,

the covenant was [...] a contract between the Scottish nation and God, over and against the claims of Charles I to be God's prince. [...] At the height of the covenanting uprisings, the king instituted a policy of extra-judicial killing. Once again, where a British monarch saw dangerous sedition, the covenanters saw martyrs. However, the covenanters were not only martyrs for God, the National Covenant made them martyrs for Scotland. [...] Just as the martyr Jan Hus became an important marker of Czech nationalism, so the covenanting martyrs reinforced a distinctively Scottish sense of religious identity. [...] Although the covenanters were driven by a religious cause, they were part of a much more significant political shaping of the nation.¹⁰²

This was, if not the first, one of the first examples of explicitly national martyrology. However, this was not a nation-state martyrology in modern terms, since it was still based on the medieval conception of the relationship between secular political authority and divine sovereignty. The concept of sovereignty, in other words, was not yet secularized. Interestingly, the modern concept of state sovereignty, which is the basic principle underlying the dominant Westphalian model of state foundation, emerged in the context of the European wars of religion. Jean Bodin, though he did

101 Middleton 2014, 128.

102 Middleton 2011, 114–115.

not invent sovereignty, was certainly the first who conceptualized it in a systematic manner. In his masterwork *Les Six Livres de la République*, published in 1576, Bodin sought to find a way to end chaos and war, which he perceived to be the natural result of the feudal order, in which principalities, guilds, cities, and trading unions were formally united under the Church and Emperor, but which did not have the power to subdue the others in a time of crisis. According to the French jurist and philosopher, the sovereign must be both able to create laws *ex nihilo* (the «positive law») and free to break them at his own discretion, otherwise he is bound to the laws he creates and therefore can no longer be the sovereign.¹⁰³ After experiencing religious wars himself, Bodin's goal was «to make civil law the will of the sovereign» in order «to undermine some of the impact of customary and natural law. Effective law becomes the command of the sovereign.»¹⁰⁴ Thus, he conceives sovereignty as absolutely independent from the subjects, inasmuch as the sovereign becomes the source of his own legitimacy responsible only to God.

Despite Bodin's unquestionable importance for the development of state theory, the «father» of the modern narrative of sovereignty is Thomas Hobbes. Like Bodin's most famous work, the *Leviathan* was also a political answer to the historical context of religious wars. Thomas Hobbes published the *Leviathan* in 1651, three years after the end of the Thirty Years War. The anthropological assumptions on which the theory is founded reflect the experience of violence and terror. As we saw in chapter two, according to Hobbes, people, by entering into society, agree to give up their «natural» sovereign rights in order to avoid constant civil wars and anarchy, to which humans are prone due to their «evil» human nature. Since the sovereign is not bound by this original contract, there are no limits to his authority. While Bodin bases the legitimacy of the sovereign on the divine sanction, Hobbes builds his own on the social contract between «naturally free and equal» individuals. Hobbes is thus the first thinker who really secularized the concept of sovereignty; but the «secret index» of the theological understanding of sovereignty continues to operate implicitly in Hobbes' conceptualization. The idea of an absolute enemy, which can potentially destroy society from the inside or outside, is in fact itself the product of a signature from the pragmatic hermeneutical context of Christian religion and theology to a secular one. An eschatological conception of history deprived of the idea of a messianic salvation is the basis of a mythical

103 See Fuller 1966, 19.

104 Vincent 1987, 54.

narrative in which the state monopoly of violence becomes an undisputed dogma.

It is in this historical, pragmatic and hermeneutic context that the state martyr figure was able to emerge. The statalization and nationalization of the martyr is the product of the mutual relationship of influence between the modern discourse of sovereignty and what Foucault calls discourse about race struggle. The secularizations of an eschatological understanding of history—history which is now understood as the battlefield in which society within national borders is permanently threatened by internal and external enemies—, sovereignty and the martyr figure are constitutive moments in the development of a modern *political religion*. Marcela Cristi proposes a definition of political religion that resumes, criticizes and develops Robert N. Bellah's concept of civil religion, which I consider useful for the purposes of this study. Bellah defines civil religion in America «as a genuine vehicle of national religious self-understanding», which provides a «transcendental goal for the political process» and contributes to the unity and collective identity of Americans.¹⁰⁵ More than three decades after Bellah's publication, Cristi adopts some central aspects of this definition, but makes remarkable changes:

Civil religion is concerned with both the social *and* the political order. Civil religion tends to sacralize certain aspects of civic life by means of public rituals and collective ceremonies. [...] Civil religion may be considered a belief system or, a surrogate religion that expresses the self-identity of a collectivity. Yet, like secular ideologies of different kinds, civil religion may also attempt to force group identity and to legitimize an existing political order by injecting a transcendental dimension or by putting a religious gloss on the justification. This latter manifestation I call political religion.¹⁰⁶

According to this definition, political religion has one *modus operandi* and two functions. The term «sacred» indicates the *modus operandi*. Civil religion operates through practices of sacralization, which are identified with rituals and ceremonies. Those practices are anchored in a system of beliefs, which seems to be both the fundament and the product of sacralization practices. Their functions concern two areas of human life: social and political organization. First, sacralization causes identification of the individual with collectivity and, second, there is a legitimization of the political or-

105 Bellah 1967, 8.

106 Cristi 2001, 4.

der. Although not explicitly stated, the difference between political religion and other kinds of ideologies, which Cristi terms «secular», is that the former gives political and social order a transcendent dimension. It is necessary to postulate this distinction, otherwise the concept of political religion would lose all heuristic value.

Cristi stresses the political and ideological implications of political religion. According to Cristi, Bellah was strongly influenced by Durkheim, who «conceives religion as essentially a *spontaneous* phenomenon.»¹⁰⁷ Due to this adoption of Durkheim's «consensual tradition», Bellah's notion of civil religion is not useful in studying those cases in which political religion is used as a tool to further national policies or programs. Cristi proposes combining the theoretical model of Durkheim with that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that is, conceptualizing political religion on the basis of its dual manifestation: as a *culture* and an *ideology*. Durkheim's notion allows one to take into account elements of *spontaneity* within political religion. By contrast, the Rousseauian model allows one to consider the possibility of the *imposition* of political religion.

Indeed, Rousseau—despite calling it «civil religion»—conceptualizes a political religion that is designed and controlled by the state. He hypothesizes that this form of religion is necessary for the proper functioning of a good republican political order. The main function of political religion is to ensure the loyalty of citizens to the social contract, the law and the nation. He considers Christianity (and all forms of positive religion) inadequate to fulfill this task; there must be a «*purely* civil profession of faith, the articles of which it is the business of the sovereign to determine.»¹⁰⁸ The articles are the following: there is a benevolent god; there will be life after death; the just will be rewarded and the wicked punished; the social contract and the laws are sacred; sectarian intolerance is prohibited.¹⁰⁹

Rousseau, like most Enlightenment thinkers, believed that Christian religion was destined to disappear with the collapse of the old regime; but he also believed in its indispensability as a source of transcendental morality for the legitimization of the state. This is why his philosophical project called for the *creation* of a new religious belief. This is the meaning of the adverb «purely» in the citation above: Rousseau considers a form of faith purged of the language and the mythologies of positive religions, primarily Christianity. Rousseau leaves no doubt that political religion must be im-

107 Cristi 2001, 7.

108 Rousseau 1994, 166.

109 See Bertham 2004, 185.

posed. The state must fix its own cult, its dogmas and its language forms. But is it possible to shape an ideology that is not articulated by the semantics, narratives, and rituals from earlier traditions of thought and action? To rephrase the question: is it possible to *create* a new religious language and way of social acting from nothing?

There are two passages in Rousseau's oeuvre that I consider important to highlight why the idea of a «pure» civil religion should be considered abstract and ahistorical. Those passages also help to establish a connection between the issue of political religion and that of martyrdom and, in particular, the emergence of national martyrs. The first passage is situated at the end of his *Social Contract* and clarifies the way in which the state should impose civil religion. Rousseau writes that «it does concern the state that each citizen should have a religion which makes him cherish his duties» and that if a citizen is «incapable of cherishing the laws and justice sincerely, or of sacrificing, when necessary, his life for his duty», he or she should be banished from the state by the sovereign.¹¹⁰ The second passage is situated in his *Discourse on Political Economy*:

If it were to be said that it is well for one to die for the sake of all, I should admire the saying in the mouth of a virtuous and worthy patriot who voluntarily goes to his death out of duty, for the good of his country; but if the meaning is that a government is permitted to sacrifice an innocent person for the good of the mass, I hold this maxim to be one of the most execrable that tyranny has ever invented.¹¹¹

For Rousseau, a state that sacrifices its citizens is tyrannical, but a citizen who is not willing to sacrifice himself or herself does not have the right to participate in the rights and civil liberties guaranteed by the state and should be banished. If the state cannot force citizens, the only option that remains is to convince them that it is right to sacrifice themselves for the state. This is where the ideological dimension of civil religion becomes visible: «Good citizenship [...] has to be imposed and enforced through what Willaime has called *L'Etat éducateur*.»¹¹² However, what means does the state have at its disposal to convince people of the necessity of the state itself to the point that they are willing to sacrifice their lives for it?

During and after the French Revolution, many people died due to their belief in the values and principles of the Republic. Many of these devout

110 Rousseau 1994, 166.

111 Rousseau 1994, 19.

112 Cristi 2001, 29.

citizens were at the center of a new, specifically republican, form of devotion. As indicated by historian Albert Soboul, particularly with the increasing importance of the *sans-culottes* in political life, popular worship developed around the «martyrs of freedom», which goes hand in hand with the processes of dechristianization.¹¹³ The most famous martyr of the French Revolution was certainly the deputy and journalist Jean-Paul Marat.¹¹⁴ «In memory of Marat», wrote Soboul, «sans-culottes saw an affirmation of their republican principles, a form of popular communion, an exaltation of their revolutionary faith.»¹¹⁵

Political rhetoric played a significant role in the formation of this new form of worship. On 1 Brumaire *an II* (1793), citizen Pannequin delivered an *Eloge de Marat* before the *société populaire* of the Section de Picques. In this speech, Marat, who was killed in June of that year, was honored as «l'apôtre et le martyr de la liberté».¹¹⁶ As noted by Joseph Clark:

from the opening assertion that Marat had «anim[é] le néant, recré[é] la nature» to the conclusion that the «immortel ami du peuple» was «le ministre envoyé de la part du Dieu de la nature, pour porter la parole de vie parmi les peuples qui marchaient dans les ombres de la mort», Pannequin's *Eloge* was saturated with biblical allusions and messianic motifs.¹¹⁷

The birth of this republican martyrology shows why Rousseau's «purely civil profession of faith» is a problematic concept. It does not consider that faith in and commitment to any kind of values or principles cannot be born or develop in a vacuum, but are instead born of necessity and always articulated by adopting practices and language forms which are socially, culturally, and linguistically predetermined. The idea of the heroic sacrifice in the popular imagination turns into a cult of the martyrs. The cult of the «martyrs of freedom» resumes and iterates semantics, narrations and rituals that were developed and established within the Christian tradition.¹¹⁸

113 Soboul 1966, 332.

114 See Soboul 1966, 331–337; Schechter 2014, 161.

115 Soboul, 1966, 335.

116 Quoted in Clarke 2007, 171.

117 Clarke 2007, 171.

118 It is not irrelevant to note that the French Revolution also produced martyr figures on the opposite political front, namely the Catholics and counter-revolutionaries. A famous example is that of the martyrs of Compiègne. It is even more significant that the murderer of Marat Charlotte Corday acquired the status of a martyr of the counter-revolution. This means that there were two com-

From this point of view, republican martyrology can actually be considered a narrative that functions analogously to political religion as defined by Cristi. Firstly, martyrs were figures with which citizens who were loyal to the revolutionary project and the Republic could identify. Their representation and adoration as martyrs make them excellent symbols of the «political body». At the same time, the cult of the martyrs certainly functioned to legitimize the new political order and delegitimize the *ancient régime*. Their death was a sort of manifestation of the truth of republican principles, since they demonstrated the will of the sovereign citizens to die for the sovereign state.

Unlike the thoughts and hopes of Rousseau, the civil religion of the First Republic was articulated by taking up and reframing forms of representation that belonged to the semantic and symbolic system of the Christian tradition. Does this mean that we must deny the secular nature of the revolution and, with it, the modern sovereign state? Not at all. Both are results of the secularization process. I argue that it is precisely due to the process of secularization that the state martyr figure was able to emerge and quickly spread. On the threshold between the Middle Ages and modernity and with the emergence of nation-states, the martyr figure underwent a macro-signature through which it was transposed from the pragmatic and hermeneutic context of Christian religion (and theology) to a secular (and political) one. This transfer was possible because the figure of the martyr soon proved to be useful for the construction of the mythical narrative of the nation-state and able to appeal to the people by making them feel part of a new form of political community called the Republic. The birth of the modern narrative of the nation-state and the secular signature of martyrdom are closely linked historical phenomena.

Here it is important to draw attention to the close link between the secular use of the rhetoric of martyrdom, the birth of the nation-state and human rights discourse. As Agamben noted,

in the system of the nation-state, the so-called sacred and inalienable rights of man show themselves to lack every protection and reality at the moment in which they can no longer take the form of rights belonging to citizens of a state. [...] This is in fact implicit in the ambiguity of the very title of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and

peting martyrologies: one revolutionary, secular, and republican; the other counter-revolutionary, religious, and Catholic. They were narratives in competition, but they referred to the same language and rhetoric.

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Citizen, of 1789. In the phrase *La déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, it is not clear whether the two terms *homme* and *citoyen* name two autonomous beings or instead form a unitary system.¹¹⁹

This ambiguity is also present in the state martyr figure, which functions as a witness to the truth of universal principles, yet simultaneously serves as a symbolic political body for the citizens of a particular nation. As Hannah Arendt argues,

The reason why life asserted itself as the ultimate point of reference in the modern age and has remained the highest good of modern society is that the modern reversal operated within the fabric of a Christian society whose fundamental belief in the sacredness of life has survived, and has even remained completely unshaken by, secularization and the general decline of the Christian faith. [...] No matter how articulate and how conscious the thinkers of modernity were in their attacks on tradition, the priority of life over everything else had acquired for them the status of a «self-evident truth».¹²⁰

Just as modern political thought regards the sacredness of the life of the individual as a sacred truth encoded in the various declarations of human rights and constitutions of nation-states, it considers that the sovereign state must hold the monopoly on violence to be equally true and that, in exceptional situations, political authority has the right, if not the duty, to suspend human rights, that is, to reduce individuals or groups to mere life. This is undoubtedly one of the constitutive paradoxes of modern political thought: it tries to unify two ways of conceiving the sacredness of life, which, in reality, are diametrically opposed. On the one hand, there is the idea that life is sacred as part of the universal community of humanity; on the other hand, life is sacred in the sense that it can always potentially be killed (or left to die) in order to save and defend particular communities within the borders of nation-states.

Modern state martyrologies should be regarded ultimately as nothing more than very effective narratives concealing this paradox and ambiguity. The state martyr is one who, by dying, witnesses the necessity of the sovereign state as a guarantor of human and citizens' rights and national security. It is therefore no longer a testimony to the truth of the founding events of Christian religion—the liberation and salvation of the righteous

119 Agamben 1998, 126.

120 Arendt 1998, 314, 319.

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through the death and resurrection of Christ, which prefigure the death and resurrection of all the righteous in the future universal community—and an accusation of a political authority that decides over life and death. On the contrary, the state martyr figure is an instrument for the concealment of the real functioning of sovereign power, part of a complex mechanism, which, ultimately, has only one function: the maintenance and constant revival of modern state mythology.