



Moss, Candida

***The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians
Invented a Story of Martyrdom***

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N. Clayton Croy
Trinity Lutheran Seminary
Columbus, Ohio

Candida Moss, Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of Notre Dame, has penned a provocative book that is sure to enthuse some readers and enrage others. The thesis is evident in the title, and the topic is one on which Moss is well-qualified to write. She has previously written two academic books on early Christian martyrdom (one being a revision of her Yale dissertation) as well as a raft of scholarly articles.

The book's introduction reveals that the author's concerns are not solely historical. Moss begins with the story of the New Year's Day (2011) bombing of a Coptic Church in Alexandria, Egypt, a violent act that ended the lives of over twenty worshipers and injured nearly a hundred more. Moss notes that the victims were soon declared martyrs and that, rather than turning the other cheek, the Christian community became "militarized," as the incident came to be seen in the context of a two-thousand-year-old religious conflict. Moss's concern is that the rhetoric of persecution "legitimizes and condones retributive violence" (3). The foundation of that rhetoric, the "myth," goes far beyond modern attacks against Coptic Christians; it is rooted in a narrative that begins with the early church. But according to Moss, this rhetoric lacks justification, and "the

purpose of this book is to show that the foundations for this idea [sustained early Christian persecution] are imaginary” (20).

Chapter 1 examines “Martyrdom before Christianity.” The aim here is to refute the notion that martyrdom was peculiar to the Christian faith, and Moss rightly argues that the phenomenon of martyrdom existed long before the term was coined. Although the technical meaning of *martus* as “one who bears witness at the expense of his or her life” may be a Christian innovation, there are clearly precedents in the “noble death” tradition of the classical era and in the heroes of the Maccabean conflict. The similarities here have validity, but Moss overplays them and obscures distinctive Jewish features when she implies borrowing from Plato on the part of 2 Maccabees (50).

Chapter 2 explores “Christian Borrowing of Jewish and Pagan Martyrdom Traditions.” Early Christian martyr acts occasionally allude to the Maccabean martyrs and, more rarely, to the example of Socrates, but it is an error to assume, as Moss does, that the presence of intertextual echoes means that narratives ostensibly relating actual events are nothing but “highly stylized rewritings of earlier traditions” (56). Luke has indeed given us a portrait of Jesus’ passion in which the central character is more resolute than in Mark. Whether this means that “Luke’s heavy-handed editorial work” constitutes overwriting the events with a non-Christian theology of noble death is another question (61). If Luke’s aim was to portray Jesus as a second Socrates, he could have made it a lot clearer. Moss similarly analyzes parallels between the Martyrdom of Polycarp and both canonical and classical accounts of death. She acknowledges similarities to Jesus’ passion but also finds Greco-Roman philosophical influences. Again, meager evidence is inflated to conclude that “one of the most famous and important Christian martyrdom accounts was dependent on pagan martyrdom for its substance” (66). Other early Christian martyrs are likewise portrayed as “heroes of the classical world [who] were reshaped into soldiers for Christ” (79). Allusions to pagan models occasionally peek above the surface in martyr acts, but echoes of Jesus’ passion are far more numerous and more deliberate. Moss’s analysis lacks nuance and a sense of proportionality.

Chapter 3 picks up the language of the book’s subtitle: “Inventing Martyrs in Early Christianity.” Moss begins with the story of Chrysanthus and Daria, saints in the Catholic and Orthodox churches, a story that she characterizes as “romantic, exciting, interesting, and completely untrue” (85). Moss may be overconfident in her dismissal of the account (*National Geographic* aired a program in April 2011 describing the analysis of relics from the tomb of Chrysanthus and Daria that seemed to corroborate the basic fact of their death), but she raises an important issue thereby. The cult of the saints that began in the fourth century gave rise to a large body of hagiography, stories of venerated martyrs that often were of dubious historical value. Moss notes that later Protestants were critical of

the cult, especially its traffic in relics and superstition. She helpfully describes the work of John Bolland and his students, who gave birth to critical hagiography (89–91). Without question, the corpus of martyr acts, especially those stemming from the Middle Ages, contains a mixture of history, legend, and piety. In the spirit of the “Bollandists,” Moss isolates the six authentic martyr accounts that remain from the church before 250 C.E. She is emphatic that “these six accounts are as good as it is going to get” and that “if we cannot trust that these stories preserve the events precisely, then we cannot trust that any martyrdom stories do” (93). Moss is correct that these six accounts are generally judged to be the most reliable ones *from the early period*, but the implication that everything thereafter is legendary chaff is quite mistaken. Persecution from 250 to the early fourth century was even more systematic and widespread, and it is often attested by contemporary or near-contemporary writers.

The bulk of this chapter is devoted to a march through these six accounts, dissecting them for every possible anachronism or inconsistency, real or perceived. The drift of the chapter is clear: even in these six stories we are on shaky ground. But Moss’s skepticism is often unwarranted. She says, for example, that “literary flourishes make it impossible for us to imagine that the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is a historical account of the events as they actually happened” (100). But surely literary flourishes versus historical information is a false dichotomy. The same is true for allusions to the Gospels, alleged anachronisms, and other peculiarities. Some of these are hardly as compelling as Moss thinks; others, even if valid, scarcely require us to dissolve the account into sheer fiction or a “pious fraud” (104). Moss earnestly argues that the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* was written in the third century (nearly everyone dates it to the 150s or 160s), but the chief merit of this dating is that it serves Moss’s thesis by removing the story further away from the events, thus undermining its historical value. In general, the issues that Moss raises in this chapter deserve consideration, but they do not necessarily compel her conclusion. She notes that “there is no early Christian account that has been preserved without emendation” and that “none of the early Christian martyrdom stories is completely historically accurate” (124). Even if one grants both of these claims, the result is by no means a thin residue of legend. Emended texts with occasional inaccuracies may still relate substantially historical events.

Chapter 4 takes up the basic question: “How Persecuted Were the Early Christians?” In contrast to the distorted picture of constant persecution that we get from Christian literature, art, and film, Moss asserts that “Christians were executed as the result of imperial initiatives” for fewer than ten years out of the nearly three hundred from Jesus to Constantine (129). Apart from the fact that someone would have to be omniscient to make this claim authoritatively, the numbers Moss cites misrepresent the lived reality of Christians in the Roman Empire. As Paul Holloway warns, “scholars of early Christianity

make a serious mistake when they focus on the ‘local and sporadic’ nature of early Christian persecution—as if tallying actual deaths allows one to somehow quantify the lived experience of lethal prejudice” (*Coping with Prejudice*, 36). The *threat* to Christians’ lives pervaded the first three centuries, with the exception perhaps of the latter part of the third century. Even when martyrdom was not being carried out, all that stood between Christians and the executioner was the lack of a *delator* (an accuser).

Chapter 4 first treats the persecution of Christians by the Jews. In a post-Holocaust world, this is indeed an area to tread lightly, but Moss’s minimizing conclusion involves a peculiar word game. She claims that Jews did not persecute Christians in the first century because Christians did not yet exist: “Not only did the name ‘Christian’ not yet exist, but the *idea* of Christians as a group distinct from the rest of Judaism did not exist in the lifetimes of the apostles” (133, emphasis original). The alleged nonexistence of the name does not reckon seriously with Acts 11:26; 26:28 and 1 Pet 4:16, but more importantly, the fact that Jews might not have viewed Christianity as a religion distinct from Judaism is irrelevant. Persecution can take place *within* a religious group. By Moss’s line of reasoning, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes did not exist in the first century either!

More troubling in this chapter is the treatment of Roman sources: Tacitus and Pliny. Tacitus (*Annals* 15.44) records the famous incident of the Great Fire in Rome and Nero’s attempt to pin the blame on Christians. Because Tacitus wrote about fifty years after the events, and because Moss finds his use of “Christians” to be anachronistic, she asserts that Tacitus “does not provide evidence for their persecution” (139). There is simply no warrant for this kind of skepticism. The Great Fire, including Nero’s persecution of Christians, is accepted by virtually all Roman historians. The persecution is partly corroborated by Suetonius (16.2) as well as 1 Clem. 5–6. The difficulty that Nero poses for Moss’s “myth” is an early, large scale, lethal assault on Christians. Even if this was limited to Rome—which appears to be the case—it set a precedent to which later emperors and governors could appeal.

Pliny is harder for Moss to dismiss, since he deals with contemporary issues in his own administration. Trajan’s response is notoriously terse and does not directly address every issue that Pliny raised, but the ambiguity does not permit Moss’s conclusion that “the climate was hostile, but there was no active persecution” (145). Both Pliny’s letter and Trajan’s response presuppose that being a Christian was punishable by death. The correspondence does not create a policy but rather clarifies a preexisting practice. Whether it had the force of imperial law would have mattered little to the Christians whom Pliny executed.

Moss moves on to the emperor Decius and later incidents of centrally orchestrated persecution. She notes that these events caused a crisis for the church, both externally with Roman authority and internally in dealing with those who chose exile, relapse, or subterfuge rather than death. Even here Moss wonders if Decius is rightly characterized as a persecutor, given that his legislation may have been politically motivated. But her effort to drive a wedge between intent and result is unsuccessful. Moss's discussion of Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian underscores their political motivation of unifying the empire and tends to exonerate them of religious persecution. She acknowledges that a dichotomy of politics and religion is impossible in antiquity (174), but she still seems to appeal to it when she insists on distinguishing between persecution and prosecution (172). A century or more after the Pliny-Trajan correspondence, the emperors had to know that their actions would chiefly impact Christians and that their political aims entailed religious proscriptions.

Chapter 5 deals with the reasons for Rome's hostility toward Christians. Moss rightly contextualizes the issue by noting that life in antiquity was often brutal and that capital punishment was meted out broadly. Christians were not the only group with whom Rome had issues; there were also the Druids and Bacchants. Rome was suspicious of novelty and secrecy wherever they occurred. The Christians' particular error, however, was their refusal to support the *pax deorum* by honoring the gods of Rome. In this respect, the charge of atheism against Christians is paradoxical but understandable from Rome's point of view. In addition, there were the rumors of cannibalism and incest, which, although groundless, undoubtedly fed the fires of popular resentment.

In chapter 6 Moss examines common misperceptions and half-truths about martyrs: their pacifism, passivity, meekness, altruism, and so on. There are proper clarifications here, combined with some insufficiently discriminate analysis. True, not all Christian martyrs were passive. There were some voluntary martyrs who "outed" themselves to the authorities without coercion. Whether that justifies Moss's assertion that "Christians were eager to die" (196) is debatable. In addition, some martyrs railed against their persecutors, but Moss fails to appreciate fully the distinction between rhetorical, eschatological violence and real, historical violence. She cites the Circumcellions, a fringe group of the schismatic Donatists, as an example of violent Christian martyrs, despite their being roundly condemned by the church fathers. Moss's definition of martyr seems to expand to include persons who will taint the reputation of early Christians and then contract to exclude passive and humble persons who might provide historical evidence for the "myth." Moss asserts that "there was little difference between the behavior of orthodox Christians and the behavior of heretical ones" (213). Are we really to believe that Polycarp and the Circumcellions were cut from the same cloth?

In chapter 7 Moss identifies Eusebius as the architect of the myth. Through a selective and censorial telling of the story of the Christianity, Eusebius created the myth of the persecuted church. According to Moss, his use of the martyrs amounts to a power play; he associates martyrs with the orthodox bishops of his own day and their persecutors with the heretics. But Eusebius lived through the “Great Persecution” under Diocletian. Even if he sometimes employs the rhetorical power of martyrs for the sake of the church, it is hardly the case that the persecution that he himself witnessed or knew of is only a grand, fraudulent myth. Eusebius is a critical, contemporary witness for the events of this period. There is irony in Moss’s criticism of Eusebius’s method: “he suppresses the voices of those who disagree with him and ignores information that does not fit with his argument” (217). One could change the pronouns in that sentence to the feminine and it would describe Moss to a tee.

Chapter 8 brings the argument back to the contemporary scene. The Left’s favorite whipping boys—Glenn Beck, Newt Gingrich, Rush Limbaugh, Ann Coulter, and pro-life bishops—are trotted out. When they express concerns about life and religious liberty, Moss finds the perpetuation of the “myth” of Christian martyrdom. Moss reasserts: “Very few Christians died, and when they did die, it was often because they were seen as politically subversive” (255). Doesn’t this sound just a bit like (first minimizing and then) blaming the victims?

Despite the author’s considerable erudition, this is a deeply flawed book, a work of revisionist history. One might judge that conservative Christians in the West have sometimes overplayed the persecution card, but they have not created instances of cultural hostility out of whole cloth, and they certainly did not create the “Age of the Martyrs” out of thin air. More important, Moss largely overlooks modern Christianity in the two-thirds world, especially in the Middle East and in Communist states. Here we find not just cultural insensitivity but old-fashioned persecution: arrests, beatings, and decapitations. Exactly one week after the publication of Moss’s book, another book came out: *Persecuted: The Global Assault on Christians*, authored by Paul Marshall, Lela Gilbert, and Nina Shea. They document persecution in about forty different countries. Moss’s opening story about the bombing of the Coptic Church in Alexandria is part of that reality, but the fact that Moss uses this story to launch a criticism, in effect, of the rhetoric of *the Coptic victims* rather than the actions of the jihadist perpetrators is grotesque.

While conservative Christian rhetoric is sometimes guilty of excesses, this book swings hard in the opposite direction, revising history and denying much of the evidence for early Christian persecution. Modern ideology drives Moss’s thesis more than ancient testimony, and the result is a distortion of history more severe than the caricature she wants to expose.