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**Recla, Matthew: *Rethinking Christian Martyrdom*. The Blood or the Seed? – London: Bloomsbury 2022. (X) 232 S., geb. \$ 103,50 ISBN: 9781350184251**

In this monograph, Matt Recla argues that (ancient) Christian martyrdom should be reconsidered and that martyrs were, in fact, committing a “willing suicide with institutional support” (2). The institution supporting these suicides was not the Roman Empire, its magistrates, courts or penal system. It was rather Christianity, which, as a “sovereign institution”, controlled and exercised violence “in order to retain sovereignty” (164). In the mental world of the book, Christianity is reconsidered as an “institution” (e. g. 3 and 167–169). In all its diversity, the nascent Christian movement is thus in regard to its influence on martyrs and martyr ideology presented as monolithically institutionalised.

The book consists of a preface (vi–x), seven chap.s (1–139), a conclusion (163–168), a section with endnotes (169–199), a bibliography (201–211) and an index (213–218). In the preface, R. explains that his interest in Christian martyrdom stems from his deconversion from Christianity (vi–x), which he found deceptive, like “all institutions that exert control over our lives” (ix).

Chap. one, *Why Martyrdom at All?* serves as an introduction (1–17). R.’s point of departure is the story of a youth, John Chau, who, in 2018, was killed, while trying to tell inhabitants of *North Sentinel Island* about Christ (1–2). With this story, R. introduces his definition of martyrdom as a “willing suicide with institutional support” (2). Based on R.’s brief outline of Chau’s story, which includes quotations from Chau’s journal stating his hopes, it seems strained to view his death as a suicide (3). R. goes on to pose two questions, “what does martyrdom do for the martyr?” and “what martyrdom does for those who remain?” (4–5). R. claims and later shows (5 and 113–131) that scholarship has often neglected the first question. This observation is potentially of great benefit for scholarship. Chap. one also outlines the subsequent chap.s (10–15) and gives a “response” to anticipated reactions (15–17).

Chap. two, *“Willing Suicide”: Martyrdom as Self-Formation*, argues that martyrdom is a suicide rooted in anxiety of death (19–40). R. reformulates his first question from Chap. one in a way that gives part of his answer, “When asking what martyrdom means to the martyr, then, we are asking why one dies intentionally?” (23). R. fails to convince that the centrality of martyrdom is an intention to die. If so, why would, for example, Polycarp initially flee, or why would the Scholl siblings try to distribute their anti-Nazi leaflets in secret? However, with this as his point of departure, R. develops his thinking with reference to Heidegger (26–34) and *Terror Management Theory* (34–40).

Chap. three, *“True Because a Man Dies for It”: martyrdom as Institutional Violence* is a continuation of R.’s theoretical reflection (41–55). R. contends that “willing suicide” is autonomous, anti-institutional, and violent. This, he argues, makes it crucial for the institution, i. e. Christianity, to

control, and in its endeavour to do so, suicide is “given the name martyrdom” (41). There is no reflection on how persecuting institutions saw the martyrs as a challenge to their authority and how their violence interacted with the behaviour of Christians in court or influenced Christian interpretation. R. argues that martyrdom is a “specific type of violence – willing suicide – now controlled by the sovereign institution that renamed it” (48).

Chap. four, *Blood Is Seed: Martyrdom and the Triumph of Christianity*, is the only chap. that substantially engages with ancient sources (57–91). In light of R.’s ambition to understand the martyr (4), this relative neglect of primary sources is strange. Further, chap. four discusses martyrdom not from the perspective of the martyrs but from the viewpoint of Eusebius, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Cyprian. However, R.’s idea to discuss the role and use of martyrs in Eusebius’s *Church History* is fruitful (59–70). There is also value in his parallel reading of Tertullian and Clement (70–77) and in his reading of Cyprian (77–86). Unfortunately, his parallel reading hinges on the faulty idea that “Clement was the bishop of Alexandria” and that Clement’s view of martyrdom, in contrast to Tertullian’s, was official and “represented not only himself but also the burgeoning church” (71). Why have peer reviewers or editors not asked R. to correct this prior to publication? Further, the chap. fails to engage with scholarship on the early Christian authors analysed. Such engagement could also have spared R. from making such mistakes and sharpened his argumentation on Eusebius’ agenda and the use of martyrs in his narrative (Marie VERDONER: *Narrated Reality. The Historia ecclesiastica of Eusebius of Caesarea*, Frankfurt 2011). Further, there is no explicit engagement with the primary texts in their original languages.

Chap. five, “*Voluntary Martyrdom: Avoiding the Stigma of Suicide*”, discusses the idea, term, and phenomenon coined and identified by Geoffrey E. M. De Ste. Croix, “Voluntary Martyrdom” (93–112). R. argues that martyrdom, voluntary or otherwise, is simply suicide (105–106). R. wrestles with the fact that martyrs are not inflicting harm on themselves, in contrast to most cases of suicide, but argues that this is a question merely of “apparent means”, since “the end result is the same” (109). He likens martyrdom to “suicide-by-cop” (110 and 25); the agency on the part of the persecutors is thus reduced – they are manipulated by suicidal Christians committed to death. Further, one might say that the end result, death, is the same in suicide, murder, execution, fatal accident, and terminal illness. Does this mean that all these deaths are suicide? Most traditions and cultures, including early Christianity, do distinguish between different kinds of deaths and indeed, R. goes on to discuss the early Christian discourse on suicide with reference to Arthur J. Droge and James D. Tabor 1992, but with no reference to more recent scholarship (Nils Arne Pedersen: “*A Prohibition So Divine. The Origins of the Christian Ban on Suicide*”, in: *Contextualising Early Christian Martyrdom*, hg. von Jakob ENGBERG / Uffe HOLMSGAARD ERIKSEN / Anders KLOSTERGAARD PETERSEN, Frankfurt 2011, 139–203).

Chap. six, “*In Love with Death: Pathology and Identity in Martyrdom*”, provides a lucid analysis of previous scholarship on martyrdom (113–137). R. argues convincingly that earlier attempts at analysing martyrdom in relation to identity formation or as a pathological phenomenon while bringing results have been insufficient to understand what motivated the martyr. This, in the final section of the chap. (134–137), leads R. to reformulate one of his initial and crucial questions: “What motivates a few to willingly give up their lives” (134). Again, however, R.’s own definition of martyrdom as willing suicide makes him see the martyr as “the agent” without reference to the agency of persecutors. He speculates that there were “psychological, neurobiological, or genetic differences”

between the martyrs that made them more prone to commit “willing suicide with ideological support” than their fellow Christians (135–136, 139).

Chap. seven, *The Immorality of Religious Martyrdom* (139–162), first states that religious violence is the most abhorrent form of violence, because it is impossible to justify it (139–143). R. does not consider anti-religious violence, persecution of religious minorities, etc. R. proceeds to argue that four criteria identify martyrdom: death, willingness to die, a social setting and institutional claim (143–153). The chap. culminates in discussing the immorality of martyrdom (153–162). R. contends that Christianity, seen as an institution, is to be blamed for this wickedness, while martyrs are both victims and minions sharing in the crime of the institution (155). Only very briefly does R. consider that persecutors, in some instances, are partly to blame as well (154), and he fails to consider the various strata of society engaged in persecution: emperors, governors, municipal authorities, officers and soldiers, plaintiffs, and executioners. In the index, there are no entries for *Roman Emperor, judge, execution, magistrate, governor, interrogation, court* etc.

The quality of the volume lies in the questions it asks and its critique of relative blind spots in scholarship on early Christian martyrdom. R. has perceptibly and commendably observed that scholarship has failed to seek to understand the motives of (confessors) and martyrs. R. fails to convince, however, that martyrdom is a form of suicide, “a willing suicide with institutional support”, and that it is productive to try to understand martyrdom without consideration for the agency of persecutors.

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