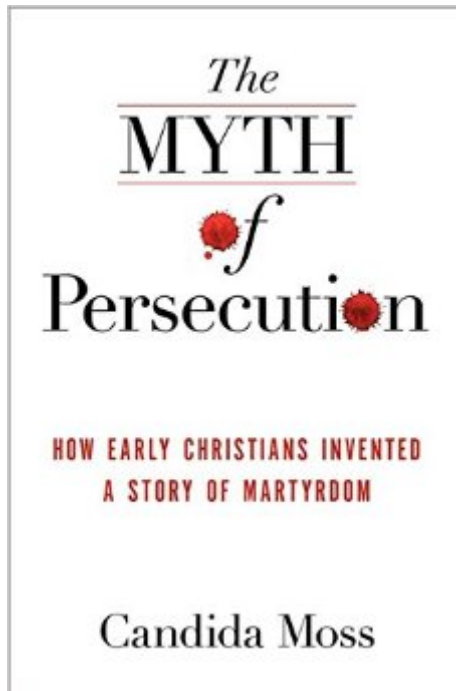


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The Myth Of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented A Story Of Martyrdom



Synopsis

In *The Myth of Persecution*, Candida Moss, a leading expert on early Christianity, reveals how the early church exaggerated, invented, and forged stories of Christian martyrs and how the dangerous legacy of a martyrdom complex is employed today to silence dissent and galvanize a new generation of culture warriors. According to cherished church tradition and popular belief, before the Emperor Constantine made Christianity legal in the fourth century, early Christians were systematically persecuted by a brutal Roman Empire intent on their destruction. As the story goes, vast numbers of believers were thrown to the lions, tortured, or burned alive because they refused to renounce Christ. These saints, Christianity's inspirational heroes, are still venerated today. Moss, however, exposes that the "Age of Martyrs" is a fiction—there was no sustained 300-year-long effort by the Romans to persecute Christians. Instead, these stories were pious exaggerations; highly stylized rewritings of Jewish, Greek, and Roman noble death traditions; and even forgeries designed to marginalize heretics, inspire the faithful, and fund churches. The traditional story of persecution is still taught in Sunday school classes, celebrated in sermons, and employed by church leaders, politicians, and media pundits who insist that Christians were—and always will be—persecuted by a hostile, secular world. While violence against Christians does occur in select parts of the world today, the rhetoric of persecution is both misleading and rooted in an inaccurate history of the early church. Moss urges modern Christians to abandon the conspiratorial assumption that the world is out to get Christians and, rather, embrace the consolation, moral instruction, and spiritual guidance that these martyrdom stories provide.

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Customer Reviews

"Te Martyrum candidatus laudat exercitus." ~from the Te Deum

When I wrote to Dr. Moss requesting her latest work *The Myth of Persecution*, I received a prompt and gracious reply assuring me of a copy. Dr. Moss hoped that I would not see the book as an attack upon the Church. I responded that I did not see the book as an attack on the Church and even if it was, the Church has been through worse. We have nothing to fear from the truth of history. After reading the book my reply is not altered. It is a well-written book with clear explanations indicative of a skilled teacher. However, I recommend *Myth* to others with reservations, since in spite of the genuine scholarship which Dr. Moss shares with us, there is a contemporary political slant given to the narrative which clouds the objectivity of how the historical evidence is presented. For instance, my cognitive processes are strained to envision St. Justin Martyr (pp. 109-112) and Glenn Beck (p. 250) as confreres in a long battle of paranoid right-wing true believers to demonize the opposition. And the whys and wherefores of the legend of Saints Chrysthanus and Daria (pp. 83-88) are intriguing enough without dragging Ann Coulter into the mix. (p. 255)

The main premise of *Myth of Persecution* is that the early Christians, and those generations who followed immediately after them, exaggerated the Roman punishment of those who refused to comply with the laws of the Empire. (p. 16) Dr. Moss claims that the Christians made it appear that they suffered one long relentless persecution for over three hundred years, which made them see themselves as victims and everyone else as the enemy. (pp. 18-19) The book goes on to assert that Christians have continued to do this and are doing it now, especially the conservative branches of the various Christian offshoots who marginalize anyone who does not agree with them, especially anyone involved in the abortion industry. (p. 252) This view completely overlooks the vast number of Christians who are engaged in giving practical help to the unfortunate, including those with post-abortion trauma. I grew up around Christians, most of whom were either Catholic or Episcopalian; they certainly did not instill in me an idea of non-Christians being the enemy. Nor did I ever have the impression that the early Christian persecution by the Romans was non-stop. I was aware at an early age that some Emperors persecuted and some did not, Diocletian being one that did. While I understand the point the author is trying to make, I think it is an oversimplification of a complex process involving many types of Christians and different cultures over two thousand years.

What makes *Myth of Persecution* an interesting read is that it shows how the Roman authorities saw the Christians. They saw them as annoying, crazy, disrespectful, cowardly, vengeful, violent, devious and even incestuous. (pp. 170-187) I have the impression that much of this assessment is shared by the author as well. Such bias mitigates the effectiveness of the genuine lessons which are to be learned from the book.

Certainly, there are elements among the diverse Christian communities who exhibit a harsh and paranoid reaction at every hostile hiccup on the horizon. I am not denying that sometimes in showing zeal for a cause Christians forget that the charity of Christ is what defines them. If Christians who read this book will take that lesson to heart then progress will have been made. The book does indeed offer a great deal of wisdom which should not be taken lightly. In Chapter 6, "Myths about Martyrs", Dr. Moss makes an excellent point about how imitation of the martyrs does not mean the complacent acceptance of an abusive or oppressive situation. The martyrs were killed because they stood up to injustice, not because they were doormats. (pp.201-204) To quote: "As much as we admire those who are willing to sacrifice themselves for others, there are also circumstances in which this is inappropriate. Modern theologians have criticized the idea that imitating the suffering Christ means obedience and submission in circumstances of oppression." (p.202) I would interject that for persons of faith suffering can still be personally redemptive, even while working to correct the injustices which create the suffering. Now the author does not deny that, in spite of the title of the book, the Christians were genuinely persecuted by the Roman authorities from time to time. This is, of course, a fact of history. Dr. Moss insists that the persecution undertaken by St. Paul in the Acts of the Apostles was not a genuine persecution, saying: "That Paul himself would admit that he had participated in this practice [i.e., "persecuting the church of God"] lends credibility to the narrative of Acts, but it does not prove that Jews persecuted Christians. The primary reason for this is that there were no Christians! 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 lifetime of the apostles." (p.133) So according to Myth of Persecution, St. Stephen the first martyr was not a bona fide martyr. Whatever the people later to be known as Christians were called, Paul persecuted them, and later repented of it. The Acts of the Apostles affirms that the Followers of Jesus were first called Christians in Antioch (Acts 11:26) a good hundred years before the Dr. Moss claims they began to be called Christians. Furthermore, Dr. Moss claims that the Christians were not really persecuted by the Romans, but "prosecuted." (pp. 159-160) "Romans saw themselves not as persecutors but as prosecutors....Just because Christians were prosecuted or executed, even unjustly, does not mean that they were persecuted." (pp.163-164). Unfortunately, this sort of sophistry is rampant in the book. The highlights of Myth include the discussions of the executions of Christians under Decius and later under Diocletian. Decius, around 250 AD, did not single out the Christians for persecution. (pp.145-151) Rather he passed a law which required that all Roman citizens participate in the Emperor worship. The Christians did not want to do this, and had to either find a legal loophole around it, or else apostatize their faith. Some chose neither option, and when

asked to sacrifice they refused, were tortured and killed. Many were able to escape prosecution but those who were executed became the martyrs whom we honor. As for the Great Persecution of Diocletian, Christians were singled out, beginning in 303, and for the next several years the persecution ebbed and flowed throughout the empire, depending upon local leadership and political circumstances. The persecution of Christians is definitely NOT a myth. Speaking of Daria and Chrysthanus, the book spends a great deal of time demonstrating how the legend of their acts has many historical inconsistencies. (pp 83-88) This is the case with many of the old legends which grew up around the various martyrs of the early Church. When I was a child during the Second Vatican Council, I remember when many early martyrs and saints were removed from the Roman Calendar because of lack of solid historical evidence of their ordeals or even of their existence, St. Catherine of Alexandria being one. The same saints, however, were retained by the Byzantine Catholic calendar, since they and the accounts of their sufferings were seen as being hallowed by sacred tradition. I think *Myth of Persecution* would have been richer if it had taken into account the power of storytelling and the liturgy as a means of permitting the believers to participate in the sacred drama. Whether every detail of the story of Chrysthanus and Daria really happened is not what was important to our brothers and sisters in the faith. What mattered was the inner truths the story conveyed which the believers would enter into and participate in through prayers, veneration of relics and the sacred liturgy. We will never have the newspaper accounts of the death of Daria and Chrysthanus and of any number of other martyrs. The accounts do not exist. We do, however have a rich tradition about them, passed on through good times and bad. And we have the relics of Chrysthanus and Daria, which have recently been examined, according to the National Geographic, showing that they were young, highborn and possibly buried alive. There is a great deal in the book about how Christians see the world as the enemy. But Jesus warned us that it would be so. "In the world you will have distress, but have confidence, I have overcome the world." (John 16: 33) Christians must always guard against the things of the world which threaten the health of the soul. We must not forget the confidence which we are invited to have in Jesus Christ, and this confidence should preserve us from the very perils we wish to avoid, the tendency pass rash judgment, to despair, to become bitter, to hate, to be greedy. Martyrdom is overcoming those things of the world, and in that way supersedes political and cultural vicissitudes. (This book was sent to me by the author's representative in exchange for my honest opinion.)

A friend took a photo of this book in a bookstore and sent it to me asking if I'd review it. Naturally, I said I'd see if I could find it and fortunately, I found it at the local library and ordered it eager to find

out just how exactly Candida Moss had found out something that no other historian had found out in all these years. What I found out rather was that like many other revisionists, Moss sees all the evidence in favor of her position as ironclad and everything contrary to it as reason to be skeptical. Moss actually plays her hand throughout the book saying how she wants there to be more constructive dialogue and that can't be had as long as one side is saying that they are persecuted. Now if all Moss had said had been that the persecution card is played way too easily by both sides, there would have been no complaint. Indeed, Christians have too often played the persecution card. If you're told to say "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas" when you work at a department store, that could be silly and irrational and anything else, but it is hardly worth calling persecution when other Christians are losing their lives elsewhere. But if Christians can play the card too lightly, Moss's problem is she only plays it in one situation. If people are being killed, then that's persecution, but if the government is not actively killing Christians, then she says persecution wasn't going on. Much of the persecution going on would have been social. It could occur in being ostracized from society, being treated as shameful and deviant, loss of property, not being given basic rights in society, etc. This would have resulted in killing in severe cases. Now Moss to an extent does recognize that there was a reason the Roman Empire did not like Christians, but she doesn't really paint the full picture of it. Religion and politics would have been inseparable in the days of the Roman Empire and to go against the religious cult of the day, which would not include Jesus, would mean going against the political system. In short, being a Christian would be seen as being a rebel against the Roman Empire, especially if what you were saying was that your god, Jesus, was King. Moss also at times in the book says statements that she does not back with sources. For instance, on page 16, she says "Scholars of early Christianity agree that there is very little evidence for the persecution of Christians." Perhaps they do. What would have been helpful is to see this claim which could in fact be a central point to her book be backed by naming some of these scholars. The reader who is wanting to know who these scholars are however will be disappointed. Moss doesn't list them. The unaware reader will be caught off guard by such a statement. The aware one wants to see a statement backed with evidence. Moss also tries to show a history of martyrdom, yet quite interestingly, sometimes the facts don't really go that way, but she's willing to show martyrdom anyway! For instance, consider Daniel and his three young friends. Do they count as Christian martyrs? Moss tries to show that they would have fit into a culture of martyrdom yet on page 48 says "Apart from the fact that Daniel and the three young men don't die, these are exactly like Christian martyrdom stories. A pious individual refuses to perform some action because it goes against religious law and is condemned to death. This idea is linked to the

expectation that the person will be rewarded for piety and the opponents will be punished.

Everything we need for martyrdom we can find in Daniel."Why yes! We have a perfect story of martyrdom here! You just have to ignore the fact that Daniel and three young men DID NOT DIE. Yes. That's a minor little detail but aside from them dying for their beliefs, everything else is like they did die for their beliefs. When she gets around to the claim of Tacitus, she uses many of the kinds of arguments we would expect from Christ-mythers. For instance, she says that it is anachronistic for Tacitus to use the term "Christians" since at the time of the great fire, the followers of Jesus would not be known as Christians. This is something that could be disputed, but let's accept that it's true purely for the sake of argument. At the time Tacitus is writing this, the people who would read his book would know exactly who he was talking about. What would be problematic about him using a name like Christian to refer to a group that was the same in the content of their beliefs in the past? Is there a problem with using a term that would be a modern understanding of a group if it in fact identifies that group? Also, she says that the writing takes place fifty years after the events. To this, the reply is "And?" Most of the writings of Plutarch take place that much later. Much of the other events described in Tacitus's writings also occurred 50+ years later. Does Moss want to equally extend doubt to other writings of ancient history because of a time gap that is really small by the standard of ancient history? Moss also tells of how Polycarp was made to be like Jesus. In a sense, this is true. Polycarp would want to act like Jesus in how He died. This is common. Yet when she does this, she twists the story. On page 63, she says Polycarp is betrayed by someone close to him. Indeed, he was. We could think that this would fit in perfectly with the Judas image, but let's look at what the account actually says: CHAPTER 66:1 And when those who sought him continued in the pursuit, he departed unto another villa, and straightway they who sought him came up. And when they found him not, they apprehended two lads, of whom the one, when put to the torture, confessed. 6:2 For it was impossible for him to escape their notice, since they who betrayed him were of his own household. For the Eirenarchus, which is the same office as Cleronomus, Herodes by name, hasted to bring him into the arena, that he indeed might fulfil his proper lot, by becoming a partaker of Christ, and that they who betrayed him might undergo the same punishment as Judas. Yes. The similarities are right there. We all remember in the Gospel accounts how Judas was captured by the Sanhedrin and then tortured until he fessed up to Jesus's whereabouts and....wait. What's that? Judas wasn't tortured but gave the information on his own so that Jesus could be arrested? Hmmm. That does change things a little doesn't it? Like I said earlier, Moss too often accepts evidence easily that agrees with her and disregards that which doesn't. If a text could have any editing or theological addition in it or anything that Moss just doesn't understand, then we

should consider it absolutely worthless as a historical account. If instead there is something that goes with her theory, we should accept it wholeheartedly without much in-depth looking. For instance, Moss on page 144 writes about how the Christians presented themselves to C. Arrius Antoninus and desired to be executed in 185 A.D. This governor told them all to just go home. Moss sees this as Christians seeking martyrdom. Could it not just as well be a response to martyrdom going on and the Christians saying "Hey. If you want to deal with us, come here and get us!" It could be they would also be aware how problematic it would appear to the populace for the governor to go after a group of people like that. Consider it a challenge. Moss also writes about a Christian monk named Shenoute in the fifth century who reportedly said "There is no crime for those who have Christ" in order to explain the destruction of a pagan temple. Did he say this? It would be nice to know, but in the endnote, all Moss has is a reference to an author who used that as the title of his book. It would have been better to have had a source of the original quotation itself. Perhaps Gaddis, who she gets it from, did get it from an original source. Should I not have that cited instead? What if I want to see the quote in its original context? Now Moss is certainly right that too many people do look at treatment they consider persecution and say "I must be doing something right!" This is not the case. Biblically, if you are living a godly life in Christ Jesus, you expect to be persecuted, but because you are persecuted, it does not mean that you are doing something right. The best way I can think of to conclude this is with the work of Dr. Michael Bird. "I've taught Christians from persecuted churches in Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sudan, China, and Egypt. Persecution is no myth. These Christians, average men and women like you and I, have either seen or experienced some of the most unspeakable and inhumane evils one could mention. There is no myth here, only a cold and brutal evil that is faced by innocents. Moss is obviously a religious academic superstar in the making. She did a great job on the Bill O'Reilly show giving his Republican Jesus a good going over. The Yanks will love her pommy accent. However, I can't help but think that a few weeks visiting churches in Juba, Karachi, Alexandria, or Lebanon might give her some life experience to better inform her own career for a life in academics and the media. It's one thing to write about the myth of persecution from the safety of a professorial chair with minions chanting for more tweets to bash the religious right; but it might be a harder myth to perpetuate after listening to a mother in Juba telling you what a Muslim mob did to her eighteen month year old son." Yes. It would be interesting to see if Moss and her fans would be willing to go to these countries and see this going on and write the same thing. (Keep in mind as I write this that ISIS is the major threat right now and I know of no place where a site like "Voice of the Martyrs" was interacted with in the book) For now, I must conclude that Moss has

shown instead that if you ignore everything opposed to you and emphasize everything that works in your favor, it's easy to make a historical case. The problem with it is just that it won't be true. In Christ, Nick Peters

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