

THE DIFFERENT MEANINGS OF “MARTYR”

1. Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, Mass, 1965), p.519: Martyr.
 - 1: one who voluntarily suffers death as the penalty of witnessing to and refusing to renounce his religion.
 - 2: one who sacrifices his life or something of great value for the sake of principle.
 - 3: a great or constant sufferer.

The word martyr comes from Greek *martus*, witness. Here is the parallel with Webster 1.

2. Witness in the new Testament and the Old Christian Church was a woman or a man who followed Christ and, forced to do that, had to speak out. Danger was not sought after, but if compelled there was no other possibility than witnessing.

The witness followed Jesus on his way to the cross. He did not seek glory for himself. He was not violent. He did not desire anything, besides to follow his Lord. He knew that there was no worth in himself. All worth was in Christ, whom he followed. It was not about earning heaven or eternal life. His life was, as ours, hidden with Christ in God. He was not a saint either, although the church later made him one. To be a martyr in the “gospel-sense” means: There is no other possibility than to follow Jesus, to and in his death.

3. A martyr in the religious sense (he is not a witness) is in fact the scapegoat, out of whose ritual suffering a new form of society, or the reconstruction of the old one, can come into existence. Of course he is afraid of death, as we all are. In the same time there is much ambivalence, in any case in modern martyrs. They wish to be martyrs, because everybody wishes them to be martyrs. So they give their blood, their life, for a free Ireland or whatever.

All religious martyrs are in the midst of violence. Violence itself drives them out. They are seeking violence and martyrdom. As martyrs they provoke new violence. In fact they are part of the vicious circle of violence, because no scapegoat, no religious martyr, can really be driven out, so making a devil-god out of him. In fact he stays in some way with us with aspects of the sacred, the violence, so being a catalyst of new violence.

4. This is true for IRA people, for UDA people, although much less, IRA people are in the old Irish tradition of bloody martyrs. But, of course, there are wholly other scapegoats, martyrs, who we mostly forget: people, killed in accidents a.s.o. Very probably we need them. This could be a point to think further about, but it is one of the whole of modern culture, not a Northern Irish one especially.
5. Roman Catholic saints are in fact a very curious mixture of the witness in the old Christian sense and the religious heroes, the scapegoats, who did not become gods and/or devils, but who partook in the sacred. I don’t suppose that we have to follow up that.

6. It could be useful to analyse the great Irish saints (Patrick, Columban and many minor ones to find eventually, lines from them to the modern saints of Irish history. But I don't suppose that it is something for us, anyway not in the moment.