



## T. D. BARNES ON RODNEY STARK'S CLAIM THAT ONLY A "TINY NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS WERE EVER MARTYRED"

Some time ago, someone on social media started a campaign under the hashtag of "Black Lives Matter". Someone else soon started another in response under the hashtag of "All Lives Matter". The supporters of the former responded with extreme fury to what, on the face of it, was a neutral response. They saw it as belittling them. Of course they were right to think this, and such was indeed the intention. On matters of controversy, playing down something is not a neutral stance, however it is presented.

A certain Rodney Stark, who I understand is a sociologist, in his *The Rise of Christianity. A Sociologist reconsiders History* (Princeton, 1996), page 179 writes (I have highlighted the relevant passage):

But how could a rational person accept grotesque torture and death in exchange for risky, intangible religious rewards?

First of all , many early Christians probably could not have done so, and some are known have recanted when the situation arose . Eusebius reported that when the first group of bishops was seized, "some indeed, from excessive dread, broken down and overpowered by their terrors, sunk and gave way immediately at the first onset" (*The Martyrs of Palestine* 1 , 1850 ed.) . Second, **persecutions rarely occurred, and only a tiny number of Christians ever were martyred-only "hundreds, not thousands" according to W.H.C. Frend (1965:413)**. Indeed, commenting on Tacitus's claim that Nero had murdered "an immense multitude " of Christians, Marta Sordi wrote that "a few hundred victims would justify the use of this term, given the horror of what happened" (1986:31) . The truth is that the Roman government seems to have cared very little about the "Christian menace. " There was surprisingly little effort to persecute Christians, and when a wave of persecution did occur, usually only bishops and other prominent figures were singled out. Thus for rank-and-file Christians the threat of persecution was so slight as to have counted for little among the potential sacrifices imposed on them.

The statement of W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, Oxford, 1965, p.413 and p.435 is as follows:

How many victims were there? Porphyry believed that 'thousands' had died in the persecution of Decius and Valerian.<sup>163</sup> The writers of the Ancient World, however, had only their personal experience and rumours to rely upon. Accurate statistics are the product of the needs of modern government. Dionysius of Alexandria states that 'very many' were killed in Egyptian towns and villages,<sup>164</sup> but he only names seventeen victims. In Palestine and Syria the deaths only of Bishops Alexander and Babylas are recorded, though Origen

was imprisoned. In Asia Minor hardly a dozen deaths are known, though others, like the famous Seven Sleepers of Ephesus said to have been immured in a cave outside the city, survived in legend. Rome could boast of its Bishop Fabian, and the Presbyter Moses.<sup>165</sup> In Africa, where Cyprian's letters and other writings give a remarkably complete picture of the situation in Carthage in Decius' reign, eighteen martyrs who died in various ways are recorded by name, and another seventeen as confessors.<sup>166</sup> The numbers of the victims may have been considerably higher, however, for there is no knowing how many 'companions' accompanied their leaders, nor indeed, how many died in prison and were accepted by Cyprian as martyrs. <sup>167</sup> Deaths over the whole Empire may probably be numbered in hundreds rather than thousands, but they were enough to vindicate the martyr-spirit at the moment when it was in danger of foundering amid the outward prosperity of the Church.

[163] Porphyry, Frag. 36 (ed. A. Harnack) *ABAW.*, 1916, 63 (citing Macarius Magnes, iv.4) 'μύριοι τούτοις ὁμόδοχοι οἱ μὲν ἐκαύθησαν, οἱ δ' ἄλλοι τιμωρίαν ἢ λώβην δξαμένοι διεφθάρησαν'. The context suggests gross exaggeration!

[164] *H.E.*, vi.42.1. See for a summary of the available evidence, Albert Ehrhard, *Die Kirche der Märtyrer*, München, 1932, 66-8.

[165] *Liber Pontif.*, xxi (Duchesne; 148). Also mentions Maximus the presbyter and Nicostratus, a deacon, who were imprisoned.

[166] Cyprian, *Ep.*, 22.2-3 (*CSEL.*, iii.1, 534-5).

[167] *Ibid.*, *Ep.*, 12.1.

Stark's claim has been widely echoed, I believe. So it was with some interest that I came across the remarks of T. D. Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History*, Mohr Siebeck, 2010, [p.294-5](#), [n.18](#) on the subject. I have added paragraphs to what was in fact a footnote.

[18] Unfortunately, Dodwell's work [on Lactantius] gave rise to a long and ultimately sterile controversy over the total number of early Christian martyrs.

On the one hand, it is absurd to imagine (with *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and Gustav Mahler) how in heaven 'Elftausend Jungfrauen / Zu tanzen sich trauen' after being martyred at Cologne with Saint Ursula (BHL 8426-8451).

On the other hand, Edward Gibbon was being deliberately tendentious when he accepted Grotius' high estimate of the number of Protestants executed in the Low Countries under the emperor Charles V in order to argue that 'the number of Protestants who were executed in a single province and in a single reign far exceeded that of the primitive martyrs in the space of three centuries and of the Roman empire' (*Decline and Fall* 1 [London, 1776], Chapter XVI [2.139 Bury = 1.580 Womersley]).

Some recent estimates carry the process of minimising the number of martyrs to absurd extremes. Thus R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity. A Sociologist reconsiders History* (Princeton, 1996), 179, states that 'only a tiny number of Christians ever were martyred.' Stark estimates, apparently in all seriousness, that a total of fewer than one thousand Christians were ever executed by the Roman authorities over the course of nearly three hundred years. He justifies this impossibly low total by alleging that W. H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and*

Persecution in the Early Church (Oxford, 1965), 413. estimated the total as 'only "hundreds, nor thousands".'

There are errors here on three levels. First, Stark seriously misreports Frend, who was talking solely about the number of Christians who were martyred under Decius and Valerian, that is, in 250-251 and 257-260. Second, Frend misreports the ancient source whom he took to be Porphyry and whom he accused of 'gross exaggeration' (435 n. 163): that source spoke not of 'thousands,' but of 'countless' (μύριοι) Christians who were burned alive or tortured and put to death in other ways (Macarius of Magnesia 4.4, whence Porphyry, *Contra Christianos*, frag. 36 Harnack. Third, while Macarius certainly derived material from Porphyry, he cannot legitimately be assumed to preserve Porphyry's actual words: JTS, N.S. 24(1973), 428-430.

Which neatly disposes of Stark, and indeed of Frend.

It is always interesting to hear of the [Apocriticus](#) of Macarius Magnes, who preserves the words of a bitter late-antique anti-Christian source. Porphyry was a contemporary of the persecutions of the late third century, so his testimony would have some value. But Macarius Magnes was probably a century later. What does he actually say? Omitting the editorial titles, here is [book 4, chapter 4, from the SPCK translation](#). It is the pagan speaking:

Let us look at what was said to Paul, "The Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, Be not afraid, but speak, for I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee" (Acts xviii. 9-10). And yet no sooner was he seized in Rome than this fine fellow, who said that we should judge angels, had his head cut off. And Peter again, who received authority to feed the lambs, was nailed to a cross and impaled on it. And **countless others, who held opinions like theirs, were either burnt, or put to death by receiving some kind of punishment or maltreatment**. This is not worthy of the will of God, nor even of a godly man, that a multitude of men should be cruelly punished through their relation to His own grace and faith, while the expected resurrection and coming remains unknown.

I was quite unclear why Frend claims that "The context suggests gross exaggeration!" Nothing suggests it to me.

On such shaky foundations were a world of belittling anti-Christian jeers founded. But the lesson for us all is: verify your sources!

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