Choosing to Die for God:
Individualization and Agency in Ancient Christian Martyr Literature

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In 203 C.E., the Roman procurator Hilarianus condemned a young matron and new mother named Vibia Perpetua to be publically executed in the amphitheatre of Carthage for refusing to sacrifice for the good of the emperor and for confessing to be a Christian, as she told her father, “I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian.”1 In *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas (MPF)*, the anonymous teller of her tale, describing how she herself guided the gladiator’s sword to her throat, comments that “It was as though so great a woman, feared as she was by the unclean spirit, could not be dispatched unless she herself were willing (nisi ipsa uoluisset).”2 He records her story (and those of her companions) so that “No one of weak or despairing faith may think that supernatural grace was present only among those of ancient times, either in the grace of martyrdom or of visions, for God always achieves what he promises, as a witness to the non-believer and a blessing to the faithful.”3

Some fellow Christians, however, were horrified at this attitude. Only the foolish could possibly think that a mere verbal confession “We are Christians” is sufficient to effect salvation; if that were true, “the whole world would endure this thing and would be saved,” declares one author. Such thinking only shows their ignorance, and leads them to hand themselves over to the clutches of “the principalities and the authorities” and to destroy themselves in a “mortal death.” Worse, it turns God the Father into a vain and boastful advocate of human sacrifice—a practice denounced even by pagans.4 “The true

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2 *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* 21.10 (Musurillo, pp. 130-131).
3 *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* 1.5 (Musurillo, pp. 106-107).
4 See *Wisdom of Solomon* 12.5-6; Pliny, *Natural History* 30.12-13; Plutarch, *Roman Questions* 83; and the discussion of Rives, “Human Sacrifice.”
witness,” this Christian claims, is “when a person comes to know himself and God who presides over the truth; then he will be saved and crowned with the crown unfading.”

Much was at stake for ancient Christians threatened with persecution. Not only their very lives, but the truth of their beliefs and way of life—and the shape of what Christianity would become—hung on how Christians understood their situation. Are Christian martyrs the heroes of the faith or the dupes of demonic powers? Is violent death a gateway that God has opened to eternal life or a desperate attempt of impotent demigods and their agents to stop the spread of the gospel truth?

In the contemporary period, martyrdom remains very much a topic of controversy, but the questions under debate have shifted, exposing different assumptions both about religion and about the nature of the individual. Debates now frequently concern whether martyrs are best perceived as heroes fighting against oppression, psychologically disturbed individuals, or examples of a group’s capacity to exert social control over its members, even to the point of dying. Such questions lead us into heady and complex discussions in multiple fields in the humanities and social sciences, anthropology and sociology, psychology and philosophy, religion, ethics, and law. In these varied domains of academic discussion, notions of “the individual,” “individualization,” “individuality,” and “individualism” have acquired diverse and often over-determined sets of significations and meanings. To situate “religious individualization in the Hellenistic and Roman period” in such a varied conversation is thus itself a complicated matter, rich with opportunities and pitfalls.

What I propose in this essay is to focus upon the question of religious individualization in terms of the “scope for action” afforded to Christians faced with the prospect of Roman persecution by examining the Carthaginian Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas, Origen of Alexandria’s Exhortation to Martyrdom (ExMart), and brief

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5 Testimony of Truth 31.22-32.21; 44.30-45.6. See also 43.1-7: “But when they are ‘perfected’ with the (martyr’s) pathos, this is the thought that have within them: ‘If we deliver ourselves over to death for the sake of the Name, we will be saved.’ These matters are not settled in this way.” (Text and translation of the Testimony of Truth by Søren Giversen and Birger A. Pearson, Nag Hammadi Codices IX and X. Nag Hammadi Studies 15. Leiden: Brill, 1981, pp. 122-203, with modification).

6 Beck distinguishes between “the neoliberal idea of the free-market individual (inseparable from the concept of ‘individualization’ as used in the English speaking countries) and the concept of Individualisierung in the sense of institutionalized individualism” (Individualization, xxi). My usage is follows more closely that of Kippele, Was heisst Individualisierung? pp. 20-21.
consideration of an alternative Christian work discovered during the last century in Egypt, *The Letter of Peter to Philip*. In order to understand what these works might offer to our topic, it will be important to construct an appropriate methodological framework for distinguishing ancient from contemporary notions. (To make this terminologically more clear, I propose using the term “individuation” to refer to the general problem of how persons are embedded in social life (“person” as a neutral nomenclature); “individuality” to refer to distinctiveness of a person; “individual” and “individualism” generally with regard to post-Enlightenment conceptualities; and “self” or “human being” interchangeably with regard to ancient conceptualities.) The concluding remarks will reflect upon what these early Christian works might offer to discussions of religious individualization more broadly.

Ancient and Modern Notions of the Individual/Self: Some preliminary generalizations

It may be useful to lay out some preliminary generalizations about ancient and modern notions of the individual/self that are particularly pertinent to the following discussion of Christian martyrdom, despite their obvious deficiencies in representing the complexities and diversity of either. Much contemporary discussion of individuation values modern notions of the individual as an autonomous, ego-centered, self-conscious agent acting purposefully for self-fulfillment and justice against social conventions and coercions, and many consider such a notion of individualism necessary for furthering egalitarian democracy, tolerance in conditions of pluralism, or universal human rights.7 It is widely recognized, too, that this kind of individualism is a relatively recent product of a particular social-political organization, which arose in the modern West with the increase in population and the division of labor, and which is characterized by a change in worldview or belief system.8 While Durkheim, Mauss, Dumont, and others have helpfully taught us that individualism has a history, they constructed problematic histories intended to demonstrate the progressive development of notions of the self from more primitive to higher forms of selfhood, positing the modern autonomous individual

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7 For an excellent overview of the state of the question, see Kippele, *Was heisst Individualisierungs?*
8 See Kipele, *Was heisst Individualisierung?* p. 201.
as the highest achievement. In these histories, Christianity is often accorded an important role in sacralizing human life and placing individual conscience above institutional and political demands, whether such impulses are located in the early church or (more frequently) in the Reformation.

Such “histories” are now widely regarded to be implicated in largely discredited universalizing, colonialist, and “evolutionary” intellectual frameworks—and hence the charge of our conveners “to replace sweeping theories of individualization and corresponding universal histories with scrutiny of the preconditions for, and forms of, phases of increasing and decreasing individualization, together with investigation of the handing down and diffusion of religious concepts of individuality.” Moreover, from Robert Bellah and others, much recent criticism has focused on the negative effects of individualism, especially its anti-social, self-serving aspects; and moral philosophers have attempted to articulate alternatives. Ulrich Beck has argued that we have entered a “second modernity” in which the inadequacy of the neoliberal, free-market autarkic individual is widely recognized. He writes, “It is not freedom of choice but the insight into the fundamental incompleteness of the self which is at the core of individual and political freedom in the second modernity.” For him, “individualization’ means disembedding without reembedding,” a process which leads to greater social inequality and even to a desire for “a new, and perhaps seemingly ‘democratic’, authoritarianism.”

If accurate, such a description undermines some of the fundamental assumptions of typical individualism, sociologically, psychologically, and politically.

Despite such critiques, however, individualism remains privileged in many domains, not least of which concerns notions of religion and agency. Two views are

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10 Jeffrey Stout has usefully attempted to clarify the matter lexically by distinguishing “good” and “bad” senses of the term: “Individualism (good sense): The idea that the well-being of each human being, no matter how powerless or wretched or distant, should carry weight in our moral deliberation, with the burden of proof falling heavily on anyone proposing differential treatment of a sort that might place the well-being of one over that of another. Individualism (bad sense): Preoccuption with acquiring such goods as physical pleasure, fame, money, and power for oneself; best described in old-fashioned terms as vicious and self-idolatrous” (Ethics after Babel, pp. 302-303).
11 Bellah et al., Habits of the Heart; see the essays in Carrithers et al. (ed.), The Category of the Person, and Heller et al. (ed.), Reconstructing Individualism.
12 Beck, Individualization, xxi-xxiv.
particularly important for our discussion. The first is the association of religion with intolerance and social control (more on this below); the second is the evaluation of religious beliefs as fantasy or false consciousness. We can see one effect of this latter view for our topic operating in existential anthropology as described by Nigel Rapport and Joanna Overing:

"Indeed, there is no other source of human agency but individuals. In search for relief from, or denial of, the burdens of responsibility in their lives, individuals sometimes imagine other sources—gods, ancestors, natural forces, linguistic grammars, cultural traditions, unconscious histories, social conditions—but these are fantasies, and serve as puppets in the hands of their individual users. This denial of responsibility and turning oneself into an object created, construed and controlled from without, Sartre calls ‘bad faith’ living one’s life ‘inauthentically’. What it is also important to say is that it [e.g. turning oneself into an object—or an instrument of another] too is an instantiation of individual agency and subjectivity; here are individuals making themselves into certain kinds of object. An existentialist appreciation of human life becomes ‘humanist’ at that point when it is felt that individuals can do better for themselves than spend their lives falsely objectifying the fantastical, and perhaps they can be influenced toward more truthful construals of their condition. Hence: ‘I experience and become myself in particular environments at particular moments, and in recognizing my responsibility for the above I abide by my individual integrity: I accede to the dignity of my individuality’."\(^{13}\)

This point of view recognizes agency in the construal of oneself as an instrument or object, but evaluates it nonetheless as an evasion of responsibility, and hence of integrity and dignity. From this perspective, Perpetua’s choice can only be regarded as “bad faith” since her self-understanding as God’s instrument is based on an inaccurate (self-deceived?) construal of the human condition. In what follows, I want to suggest that such evaluations are premature, and the discussion may be helpfully complicated by attempting first to understand the ancient Christian martyr literature\(^{14}\) in terms of operative notions of what it means to be human in antiquity, under conditions of Roman

\(^{13}\) Rapport and Overing, *Social and Cultural Anthropology*, p. 192.

\(^{14}\) Here I refer both broadly to the varied genre of ancient Christian literature engaging in the discussion of persecution, including martyr acts, exhortations and sermons, revelation dialogues, and so forth, as well as the specific works under consideration here.
imperial government and within a social-economic system in which slavery was prominent.\textsuperscript{15}

In antiquity, philosophers explicitly debated questions of what it meant to be human and how the moral self should be cultivated,\textsuperscript{16} and the notions they articulated can be seen operating more broadly in various fields, including in distinctively Christian discourse on martyrdom. Ancient philosophical notions of the “self” or “human”—themselves diverse and in some respects contested\textsuperscript{17}—were most frequently represented in terms of specific characteristics that distinguished humans from animals (or gods), while yet affirming that humans also had some things in common with both. Christopher Gill suggests that both Aristotle and the Stoics characterized human beings in terms of “the capacity of rationality (including having beliefs and inferential reasoning), the use of language, sociability (in familial and communal life), the desire and capacity to search for knowledge of the truth, and (in Stoic thinking) the capacity to recognize the order and regularity of nature.”\textsuperscript{18} In the Roman period, it became increasingly common to claim that all persons were able to progress toward happiness through the exercise of reason and self-control (especially control or extirpation of the passions) regardless of their individual characteristics (individuality).\textsuperscript{19} Differences in physical endowment, personal appearance, and temperament or in social situation (whether slave or free, rich or poor, male or female, etc.) were not necessarily impediments to attaining truth and moral perfection.\textsuperscript{20} Stoics in particular argued that a virtuous character is invulnerable to exterior factors and contingent circumstances (e.g. what is “not up to oneself”), including torture, aging, sexual seduction, or loss of loved ones.\textsuperscript{21} Rather all persons were

\textsuperscript{15} Other hierarchical social relations, such as gender, are also important, but due to space will not be treated here.
\textsuperscript{16} The medical literature is another particularly important field for this discussion, which has received considerable attention in recent scholarship.
\textsuperscript{17} See below note 22.
\textsuperscript{18} Personality, 414. I have found Gill’s work in Personality and The Structured Self to be particularly useful in articulating the distinctions between ancient and modern views of the individual/self in what follows.
\textsuperscript{19} Cicero’s discussion of the passions in Tusculan Disputations IV.11-12; 22, provides a good summary of the ancient philosophical discussion; on individuality with regard to duties, see De Officis I.30-34 where he discusses characteristics such as physical endowment, personal appearance and character, concluding that “Countless other dissimilarities exist in natures and characters, and they are not in the least to be criticized” I.30 (109).
\textsuperscript{20} See The Structured Self, p. xvii.
\textsuperscript{21} The Structured Self, p. 88.
potentially capable of making proper moral choices, that is, choices which are based on
ture beliefs about the nature of reality and are arrived at through the proper application of
reasoned judgments formed in interpersonal (family and community) life and dialogue
with others. Such ancient views are markedly distinguished from contemporary
individualist views by the conviction that moral life is not grounded in a specifically
individual stance or disinterested rationality and abstraction from interpersonal relations,
but precisely in social life. This distinction is particularly apparent in certain features of
Gill’s characterization of modern Western and ancient Mediterranean conceptions of the
individual person / human self:

“The subjective-individualist conception: To be a ‘person’ is to be capable of the
kind of disinterested moral rationality that involves abstraction from localized
interpersonal and communal attachments and from the emotions and desires
associated with these. To be a ‘person’ in the fullest sense, is to exercise one’s
capacity for autonomy in establishing moral principles for oneself or in realizing
one’s own (authentic) selfhood. Those capacities, in turn, presuppose a special
kind of absolute of ‘transcendental’ freedom. To be a ‘person’ is to understand
oneself as the possessor of a unique personal identity. …

The objective-participant conception: To be a human being is to participate in
shared forms of human life and ‘discourse’ about the nature and significance of
those shared forms of life. The ethical life of a human being is expressed in
wholehearted engagement with an interpersonal and communal role and in debate
about the proper form that such a role should take. The ultimate outcome of these
two types of participation is both (a) objective knowledge of what constitutes the
best human life and (b) a corresponding character and way of life.”

22 In his study of Homeric epic, Plato, and Aristotle in Personality, Gill sets out an heuristically useful list
of themes that constitute broad patterns of thinking about the person respectively in Greek and modern
psychology and ethics:

“The subjective-individualist conception:
1. To be a ‘person’ is to be conscious of oneself as an ‘I, a unified locus of thought and will.
2. To be ‘person’ is to be capable of grounding one’s moral life by a specially individual stance (for
instance, that of ‘autonomy’, in one of the possible senses of this term). To treat others as ‘persons’ is
to treat others as autonomous in the same sense.
3. To be a ‘person’ is to be capable of the kind of disinterested moral rationality that involves abstraction
from localized interpersonal and communal attachments and from the emotions and desires associated
with these.
4. To be a ‘person’ in the fullest sense, is to exercise one’s capacity for autonomy in establishing moral
principles for oneself or in realizing one’s own (authentic) selfhood. Those capacities, in turn,
presuppose a special kind of absolute of ‘transcendental’ freedom.
5. To be a ‘person’ is to understand oneself as the possessor of a unique personal identity; this necessarily
raises the question of the relationship between having personal identity and being human.
Like modern notions of individualism, ancient philosophical views could emphasize rationality, choice and agency, and autonomy. But they understood these fundamentally

_The objective-participant conception:_

1. To be a human being (or a rational animal) is to act on the basis of reasons, though these reasons may not be fully available to the consciousness of the agent.

2. To be a human being is to participate in shared forms of human life and ‘discourse’ about the nature and significance of those shared forms of life. The ethical life of a human being is expressed in wholehearted engagement with an interpersonal and communal role and in debate about the proper form that such a role should take. The ultimate outcome of these two types of participation is both (a) objective knowledge of what constitutes the best human life and (b) a corresponding character and way of life.

3. To be human is to be the kind of animal whose psycho-ethical life (typically conceived as ‘dialogue’ between parts of the psyche) is capable, in principle, of being shaped so as to become fully ‘reason-ruled’ by (a) the action-guiding discourse of interpersonal and communal engagement and (b) reflective debate about the proper goals of a human life.

4. To be human is to be capable, in principle again, of becoming fully ‘reason-ruled’. But the extent to which any given human being is able to develop in this way depends on the extent to which she is able to participate effectively in these types of interactive and reflective discourse.

5. To be human is to understand oneself as, at the deepest level, a human being. The fullest possible development of human rationality involves reflective understanding of what ‘being human’ means, and of how this relates to participation in other kinds of being, such as being animal and divine” (_Personality_, 11-12).

In _The Structured Self_, Gill focuses more particularly upon a related, but distinct pattern he sees in Stoic and Epicurean philosophy. This leads him to offer “a broader contrast between divergent ancient ways of understanding ethical development, which has implications for the study of ancient conceptions of selfhood. Earlier, I identified two main differences between Platonic-Aristotelian and Stoic-Epicurean ways of conceiving ethical development. In the Platonic-Aristotelian pattern, this is envisaged as constituting two inter-related stages. The first stage is habituation in the norms, roles, and practices of one’s community; the second is that of reasoned reflection of ethics, based on the beliefs developed in the first stage. These stages are correlated with the development of different parts of the personality. The first stage is seen, primarily, as a process of shaping appropriate dispositions of emotion and desire, while the second is more purely rational or cognitive, although it also takes further the development of emotion and desire. The contrasting Stoic-Epicurean pattern is informed by the Socratic idea that all human beings are constitutively capable of developing towards ethical perfection, regardless of their inborn nature or social context. Humans are seen as having the rational or cognitive resources to acquire an understanding of goodness even if they are brought up in societies whose belief-structures are largely misguided or corrupt. Also, since these Hellenistic theories presuppose a unified or holistic psychological model, the process of development is not seen as directed at different parts of the personality at different stages. Development affects the personality as a whole, and can do so, in principle, at any stage of life once rational capacities have been formed. To put the point differently, the Platonic-Aristotelian pattern assumes that ethical developments depends on the right combination of (inborn) nature (_physis_), habituation (_ethos_), and reason (_logos_). The Epicurean-Stoic pattern, by contrast, eliminates or radically reconceives the role of habituation. Human nature is seen as constitutively rational, and rationality is seen as capable of shaping or reshaping the personality as a whole at any stage of adult life” (_The Structured Self_, 377).

As Gill himself emphasizes, such thematic patterns are heuristic devices to help us begin to comprehend the multiple ways in which ancient philosophers discussed questions of moral perfection and self-hood; they should not reified. Rather they help us to gain some comprehension of discursive modes of moral development broadly shared in antiquity. The issue is how do such patterns help us to understand Perpetua’s actions and her own representation of them, as well as Origen’s advice to (potential) martyrs and the disagreements among Christians about how to make rational and virtuous decisions based on differing cosmological schemas.
in terms of sociability, requiring interaction and dialogue with others to develop fully. Ideally a person would be formed by participation in a community way of life shaped by true beliefs. Hence interest was centered not on forming one’s self apart from or against social duties and demands, but on making correct judgments about what kind of society could best further happiness and the moral virtue it required. Norms of truth, justice, and goodness were inextricably woven into the fabric of the social group, which furthered one’s full humanity not least through performance of the duties owed to it. Identity is therefore not about individual characteristics or development, seen as those of an I-centered, interiorized consciousness acting from solely self-selected motives and world view, but of a person fundamentally embedded in and embodying the (normative) life and beliefs of a social group. Agency, and its concomitant possibilities for individualization, were conceived in terms of properly determining and developing one’s nature as a fully social human being. As we will see, however, the focus on moral perfection in terms of “what is up to us” points toward a concern with the limits of autonomy and choice in a society where Roman rulers used public displays of humiliation, torture, and execution to demonstrate their power to define norms of justice, enforce the law, and maintain (the divine-social) order. It was under these constraints that “dying well” became a crucial site to display one’s honor, virtue, and freedom. It is in this context that Perpetua’s choice is represented.

Preparation for Martyrdom: Perpetua’s Story and Origen’s Advice

What we know of Perpetua’s story is told by the anonymous author of The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas, who claims to describe the deaths of several Christians executed in celebration of the Roman emperor Geta’s birthday, probably on March 7, 203 C.E. Embedded within this narrative are excerpts from Perpetua’s first

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23 I neglect here the importance of war, especially the Roman civil wars.
24 I use the term “martyrdom” here capaciously to refer to the historical, literary and theological practices of Christians vis-à-vis Roman persecution. This usage is in contrast to way in which the term has more frequently been used to refer to a particular set of “orthodox” interpretations of such practices, and indeed early Christians debates over who is a “true martyr” reflect this kind of attempt to restrict the term to a particular theological meaning or set of materials/practices.
25 For a brief discussion of manuscripts, authorship, dating, and historical value, see Barnes, “Pre-Decian Acta Martyrum,” 521-525. Some scholars have disputed the authenticity of Perpetua’s “diary”; see the discussion of Bremmer, “Perpetua and Her Diary”; Kraemer, “A First-Person Account”; Heffernan, “Philology and Authorship.”
person account of her imprisonment, along with another first-person account of a vision by a fellow martyr named Saturus. In the scenes from her account, Perpetua adamantly rejects her father’s attempts to dissuade her, seeing them as temptations of the devil. When he appeals to her to have pity on him and to think of her brothers, her mother, aunt, and even her own baby, she merely responds that everything will happen according to God’s will. When the Roman governor similarly appealed to her to have pity on her father and infant son, she maintained her position, was condemned, and “returned to prison in high spirits” with her comrades.

Gifted with prophecy, Perpetua and Saturus were both granted visions. Perpetua dreamed they would step on the head of a dragon, ascending a ladder to an immense garden filled with “many thousands of people clad in white garments.” A kind, elderly shepherd gave her milk, and all the crowd said “Amen.” In another dream, the deacon Pomponius takes her into the arena, where she is stripped naked and becomes a man; she defeats an Egyptian gladiator and her trainer then offers her the branch of victory, greeting her as “Daughter.” Saturus dreams that after they died and “put off the flesh,” they are carried by angels beyond this world into an intense light. Within it is a marvelous garden where other angels pay them homage and admired them. They then enter a heavenly building, where they are greeted by “an aged man with white hair and a youthful face” along with numerous elders. After leaving that place, they go outside and meet up with their bishop and a presbyter who beg them to “make peace between us.” After greeting them, they proceed into the garden and there recognize many fellow Christians. At this point, the dream ends and Saturus “woke up happy.” Such dreams are interpreted as messages from God, affirming that while they would all be condemned

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26 It should also be noted at the outset that we are quite likely dealing with excerpts from the accounts of Perpetua and Saturus, selected no doubt for their usefulness in illustrating the larger themes of interest to the author of the Martyrdom. These excerpts relate especially to Perpetua’s struggles with her father and the Roman procurator, and describe the prophetic visions that she and Saturus had. These aid in furthering the author’s goal to supply consolation and exempla for imitation by other Christians.
28 Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas 5 (Musurillo, pp. 112-113).
29 Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas 6.3-6 (Musurillo, pp. 114-115).
30 Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas 4 (Musurillo, pp. 110-113).
31 Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas 10 (Musurillo, pp. 116-119).
32 For Saturus’s dream see Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas 11-13 (Musurillo, pp. 118-123).
to suffering and death, in the end they would win the victor’s crown and gain eternal life among other Christian martyrs and saints.\textsuperscript{33}

The anonymous author offers additional scenes that describe the courage of pregnant slave Felicitas, Perpetua’s audacious demand to their jailors that the prisoners be treated well, and the condemned Christians’ final “free banquet” where, readers are told, their strong words so amazed the surrounding mob that “many of them began to believe.”\textsuperscript{34} The story ends with a lengthy description of the public execution itself, stressing the martyrs’ steadfastness, joy, and courage, demonstrated by their actions and their interactions with guards, gladiators, and especially the audience. The author’s final lines ring with praise:

“Ah, most valiant and blessed martyrs! Truly are you called and chosen for the glory of Christ Jesus our Lord! And anyone who exalts, honours, and worships His glory should read for the consolation of the church these \textit{exempla} which are no less than (those) of old. For these new (\textit{exempla}) of virtue will bear witness to one and the same Spirit who still operates, and to God the Father almighty, to his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom is splendour and immeasurable power for all the ages. Amen.”\textsuperscript{35}

Such martyr acts could be construed as exemplary literary representations of an early individualism: an “I”-centered ego who exercises autonomy in establishing rational moral principles for herself by which she frees herself from conformity to societal demands; a unified, conscious self displayed in the practice of “autobiography” and focused upon her personal salvation such that she reasonably and willingly gives up interpersonal ties to her newborn child and family, and overcomes emotions such as maternal feeling or fear and grief at her imprisonment and impending execution; and finally, the assertion of a personal identity, “Christiana.” From this perspective, Perpetua’s literary “autobiography” might seem to offer a particularly significant instance of an interiorized self-consciousness. Indeed, for some, she represents an heroic individualism which ties Christian conversion to resistance to Roman domination. It is possible to read Joyce Salisbury’s statement this way:

\textsuperscript{33} It is interesting to note that in the visions of both Perpetua and Saturus, other Christians known to them appear—perhaps an indication of a conviction that the solidarity they felt in prison would continue in heaven?
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas} 17 (Musurillo, pp. 124-125).
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas} 21.11 (Musurillo, pp. 130-131; translation modified).
“If one is looking for a metaphor of personal change, one cannot do better than a transformation of one’s gender, which is at the heart of one’s self-identity. In her dream, Perpetua was changed into a man. Led by the deacon of her new community, she was fully transformed from her old self into a new empowered individual who could stand in the arena and fight for what she believed. Here she was remembering in a dream-form her own baptism—the dramatic change from catechumen to baptized Christian.”

We can, however, easily see elements here that suggest individualism would be the wrong (or at least an incomplete) way to read Salisbury’s statement. She points to significant communal elements: hierarchical organization (the leadership of a deacon), conversion (belonging to a new community), and ritual (baptism). To these we could add Perpetua and Saturus’s sense of community identity in the frequent use of the plural “we,” the mutual support of the imprisoned Christians, as well as the care provided for them by those on the outside (bribing guards to bring them food and other necessities—and perhaps writing materials for both Perpetua and Saturus). Sex/gender identity, too, is deeply implicated in social roles and structures, such that she is “male” in relation to defeating the Egyptian in battle, but is “daughter” in relation to her “trainer.” Gender functions fluidly to mark different social relations, not an essentialized identity. That Perpetua’s transformation was conveyed in a prophetic vision also leads us to ask about what notion of agency or consciousness is operative here.

Moreover, when we turn our gaze on the institutions of prison, legal system, and arena, the larger social-political world looms large, not merely as that over against which the individual stands (heroically), but as the context which both enables and constrains Perpetua’s choices and actions. If individuation is measured in terms of the extent of the scope for individual action (freedom and autonomy), that of ancient Christians called before Roman magistrates seems particularly constricted: apostatize and sacrifice or be cruelly tortured and executed. Yet it is within this highly constrained context that Christians struggled mightily to enact their belief that being a Christian is the only way to be a person in the fullest sense.

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36 Salisbury, Perpetua’s Passion, 109.
37 That Perpetua was well-educated is indicated first by the claim that she herself wrote down the account (MPF 2.3), but also by Saturus’ (admittedly dream) example of her speaking Greek (MPF 13.4).
My point here is not merely to make the rather obvious remark that all persons are socially constructed, but rather to ask: What notions of individuation are operating in the literary representation of *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*? How might this literary work have been used in practice by the third century Christians who heard it read? Perpetua and the other Christians are treated here not as individuals with personal religious experiences, but as *exempla* of the Christian way of life.

“(T)exts,” Catherine Bell writes, “are entities that act in the world.” Much of the literature Christians produced to address persecution by the Romans functioned most clearly as “preparation for martyrdom.” Works such as *MPF*, Origen’s *ExMart*, or the *Letter of Peter to Philip*, frequently set out *exempla* for imitation, demonstrating how to master one’s passions, especially fear and grief, and to face death with cheerful equanimity. They advocate prayer, point to scripture, and encourage believers to focus on the blessed joys of eternal life, rather than on the ephemeral pain and suffering of the flesh. “Preparation for martyrdom” texts also frequently offer counter-narratives that (re)frame and (re)signify the meaning of these deaths, challenging the implicit Roman claims that the bodies they shame, torture, and kill demonstrate the just punishment of criminals. Instead Christian literature like *MPF* or Origen’s *ExMart* represents them as witnesses to the true God, evidence of virtue (“manliness”) in the battle against false gods and idolatry. Others, as we will see in examining the *LetPetPhil*, suggest that Christians who are killed for preaching the gospel illustrate the evil nature of the world rulers and their impotence in opposing the gospel. For all Christians, these tortured and humiliated bodies do not attest to the greatness of Roman law and order, but to the courage and endurance of those who love God.

Such literature was not meant to provide an “objective” record of the past or even hagiographical encomia, but to provoke *ekphrasis*, the disciplined training of the soul.

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38 Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, p. 81.
39 See King, “Martyrdom and Its Discontents” ; Kelley, “Philosophy as Training for Death.”
40 These include not only Christ, apostles, or Biblical figures, but frequently include Socrates, Lucretia, or other notable “pagans” as well. They also occasionally offer counter examples of “failed martyrs”; for example, Quintus in *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 4.
41 For the important gendered dimensions of torture and martyrdom, which will not be discussed here, see e.g. Cobb, *Dying to be Men*, and Moore and Capel, “Taking it like a Man.”
through imagination.\textsuperscript{42} By painting mental portraits of Christians struggling with the same kind of very real fears, hesitations, and objections they felt, they were able to shape their own feelings and beliefs, so that if necessary at the appropriate time they, too, could overcome the fear of death and die well.

Such advice on how to face death was no Christian invention; it was offered by famous Roman teachers, such as Lucretius, Cicero, and Seneca. Seneca, Edwards says, teaches, “It is through rehearsing in our minds the deeds of these great individuals of the past that we may summon up the strength to act with equal bravery. Thus we too may feature among the \textit{exempla}.”\textsuperscript{43}

The anonymous author of \textit{MPF} explicitly states that the acts of the martyrs he offers are aimed to “console the church” as well as to provide “\textit{exempla of virtue}” that bear witness to the divine. That such \textit{exempla} serve specifically to help prepare Christians for (possible) martyrdom is pointed out by Origen in his \textit{Exhortation to Martyrdom}.\textsuperscript{44} There he gives numerous examples from Scripture, but especially points to Eleazar and the seven brothers from 2 Maccabees (LXX). Of Eleazar he exclaims: “What dead person could be more deserving of praise than he who of his own choice elected to die for his religion? (τίς δὲ ἄν οὖσις εὐλόγως ἐπανοίτο τεθνηκὼς ὁ ἀὐτοπροαιρέτως τὸν Θάνατον ὑπὲρ εὔσεβείας ἀναδεξώμενος;)\textsuperscript{45} Origen insists that Eleazar \textit{voluntarily chose} torment and a glorious death, based upon “reasoning in a noble-minder manner” (λογισμὸν ἀστείον).\textsuperscript{46} So, too, he exhorts his reader:

“When you are at the gates of death, or rather liberty, I beg of you, especially if you are subjected to torture—and certainly the designs of the opposition do not permit us to expect that you will not suffer—to say words such as these: To the Lord who hath the holy knowledge, it is manifest that, whereas I might be

\textsuperscript{42} See, for example, Seneca: “For the living voice and shared life will be of greater use to you than formal discourse. You should go to the scene of the action, firstly because people believe their eyes rather than their ears, and then because the journey long through precepts, but short and direct through examples” (\textit{Ep.} 6.5; cited from Edwards, \textit{Death in Ancient Rome}, p. 89). For a thorough and illuminating discussion of Roman attitudes toward death, including a discussion of fighting the fear of death as a common trope in Roman notions of dying nobly, see Edwards, \textit{Death in Ancient Rome}, esp. pp. 78-112, 144-160, 207-220.

\textsuperscript{43} Edwards, \textit{Death in Ancient Rome}, p. 90.


\textsuperscript{45} \textit{ExMart} 22.25-26.

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{ExMart} 22.28.
delivered from death, I suffer grievous pains in my body because I am scourged; but in my soul I am well content to suffer these things because I fear Thee. Thus did Eleazar die, and it can be said of him that he left not only to the young men, but also to most of his nation, his death for an example of noble character and a memorial of fortitude (γενναίότητος ὑπόδειγμα καὶ μνημόσυνον ἀπερτής).”47

To those who are older, Origen offered the example of the seven Maccabean brothers, asking them to think about whether they were going to let themselves be outdone by youngsters!48 Readers are also given an example of a parent who, when summoned to advise her child “for his safety,” instead “mocks the tyrant” and exhorts her youngest son to persevere. When this youth then challenges his executioners not to hesitate in their work, Origen comments: “Like a king handing down a decision on subjects to be judged, he also gave judgement on the tyrant, condemning him rather than being condemned by him.”49

Origen concludes this section with two other comments that are important for our discussion. In the first, he credits the Maccabean’s mother with piety and holiness for not allowing “the fires of a mother’s feelings, which inflames many mothers in the presence of most grievous ills, to be kindled within her heart.” 22.27 In Origen’s hands, this scriptural story teaches that “love of God does not tolerate the co-existence of human weakness (ἀνθρωπίνη ἀσέβεια), but drives it away as an enemy alien from the whole soul. And this weakness has become powerless in the case of one who can say, ‘The Lord is my strength and my praise, and I can do all things in Him who strengthens me, Christ Jesus, Our Lord’.”50 We see here important aspects of ancient moral development: that the highest virtue is possible for anyone, whether young or old, child or parent, man or woman; that control of “natural” feeling and passion is the mark of highest virtue when such self-control is properly guided by rational beliefs, for example the view that such death is really liberty; that dying well must be a matter of voluntary choice. Persons with these attitudes appear as praiseworthy kings who judge tyrants—not criminals or mere victims.

47 ExMart 22.13-22.
48 ExMarr 23.
49 ExMart 26 (O’Meara, p. 166).
50 ExMart 22.27.
Origen offers a wide variety of other practices aimed at molding character and proper belief within the context of Christian community. Believers should learn to focus on the rewards they will be given in heaven rather than the suffering they will undergo, learn appropriate prayers, and practice proper responses to insults, accusations and temptations. He teaches that martyrdom occurs because of divine providence; and God is the only audience whose judgment they should care about. Their enemies can kill only the body; they cannot harm the soul. Their contest is against Satan, not man. They can prepare for this battle by giving up concern for reputation, wealth, and even learning to hate their families. They should feel neither fear nor shame, for they are in truth athletes in a triumphal procession, exalted in the eyes of God. Their deaths will be an effective witness to non-Christians, atoning and ransoming not just themselves but other people as well. Cultivating these beliefs and practices should instill constancy in feelings of joy and tranquility, and ensure that Christians will display no anxiety to non-believers even under interrogation and torture. Such people will ascend more quickly than others to God (14), and they will receive the highest honor from their fellow Christians:

“As they who have endured tortures and pain gave more illustrious evidence of virtue in martyrdom than those who have not endured such trials, so they have cut and torn not only the bonds of love for life and body, but also these other great worldly bonds, have shown a great love for God and have truly taken up the word of God that is living and effectual and more piercing than any two-edge sword. Having cut so great bonds, they have made for themselves wings like those of an eagle, and can fly up to the house of him who is their Lord. just as they who have not gone through the trial of tortures and pain give pride of place to those who have proved their constancy on the rack through diverse tortures and fire, so we too who are poor, even if we be martyrs, are urged by reason to yield first prize to you, if for the love of God in Christ you trod underfoot reputation, deceitful and sought by the masses, your great possessions, and the affection of a father for his children.”

51 *ExMart* 2, 11, 19.
52 *ExMart* 23.
53 *ExMart* 34.
54 *ExMart* 15, 3, 37.
55 *ExMart* 1, 36-37, 50.
56 *ExMart* 35, 50, 30.
57 *ExMart* 4.
58 *ExMart* 15 (O’Meara, p. 156).
Only Christians belong to the elect race (τοῦ ἐκλεκτοῦ γένους εἶναι; 5.28), because they alone worship God in truth. Origen warns that Christians who think it is enough to confess God in the solitude of their hearts are deceived; salvation requires confession in public speech.\(^5^9\)

It is clear from even this brief summary that Origen’s *Exhortation* has much in common with the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*. Its author, too, emphasizes that Christians die of their own choice; they show courage in mocking the powerful who condemn them, and indeed insist that it is their executioners who will themselves be condemned in the end by God. When led into the arena, they sang a psalm, loudly exhorted the onlookers, and even challenged the Roman governor Hilarianus directly by their motions and gestures, suggesting, our author tells us, that “You have condemned us, but God will condemn you.” For this behavior, the crowd demanded they be scourged—a punishment they accepted with joy because it meant “they had obtained a share in the Lord’s sufferings.”\(^6^0\) Like the Maccabee’s mother, Perpetua does not allow “motherly feeling” to stop her, even when she initially thinks her baby might well die without her. So, too, both Origen and the author of *MPF* hold up figures like those of the elderly Eleazer, the young Maccabees, or the new mothers Perpetua and Felicitas as particularly exemplary cases of how the “weak” may stand firm against the strong. We see Perpetua herself move from uncertainty, anxiety, and grief to an increasingly calm demeanor and bold speech, until in the arena she presents a joyful figure, singing, facing down the crowd’s gaze, and dying without fear—a portrait that the author no doubt intends as a display of her virtue in overcoming the passions. Throughout the *MPF*, readers are given examples of prophetic insight affirming the presence and will of God in all that happens. Visions of eternal blessings and high honor the martyrs will receive take up a significant portion of the narrative, proving that after the flesh is gone, the soul will ascend to a heavenly place of peace and plenty. Readers see appropriate responses to temptation, false accusations, and insults, when Perpetua stands up against her father’s pleading (as against the devil), when the Christians’ behavior convinces their jailors of their virtue, and when they boldly admonish the crowd for their idle curiosity. Rather than feel

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\(^5^9\) *ExMart* 5.

\(^6^0\) *MPF* 18.-7-9 (Murusillo, pp. 126-127).
shame at attempts to humiliate them—by putting their naked bodies before the crowd, taunting them, and subjecting them to brutal treatment for entertainment—the Christians display honor through their courage and their insistence that they are not victims, but (instrumental) agents of their own fates.

In all these ways, the Marty of PF offers much the same instruction in preparation for martyrdom as does Origen, albeit in a narrative mode. What appears more forcefully in MPF, however, is the communal aspects of the martyrs’ experience. The condemned support and encourage one another in prayer and presence, sharing their visions as well as their suffering, so much so that Felicitas is worried that her pregnancy will delay her execution, meaning that she would have to undergo it alone (but by the grace of God this does not happen). Other Christians support the confessors as well, bribing guards to bring them food and secure better accommodations. Both works, however, amply provide evidence that early Christians understood and represented becoming a Christian as a process involving participation in a community (“family”), adopting rational (true) beliefs, and the cultivation of piety and virtue. For both Origen and the author of MPF, the Christian way of life was demonstrated most vividly by believers who publically confessed their identity as Christians and died willingly and fearlessly, even in the face of physical torture, humiliation, and the loss of social standing, wealth, and family. Neither age nor gender nor social status nor any other characteristic of individuality impeded them. They are *exempla* who model what it means to be fully human.

**Performance and indeterminacy**

Let’s now return to the question of agency. As we saw, both MPF and Origen emphasized the importance of the martyr choosing to die, exemplified in both speech and actions. How are we to understand these representations in terms of individualization?

Some historians, notably Donald Riddle, have seen Christian martyrdom as a particularly acute example of social control.61 From this perspective, Christian groups had to “secure from its adherents the behavior which was necessary if the movement were to survive” (24). To do this they engaged in “a specific method” of indoctrination, in the production of proper attitudes, and in constant surveillance of the potential

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61 See Riddle, *The Martyrs*.  

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martyr—practices described above as preparation for martyrdom. Yet the notion of social control is arguably tied to a discourse of individualism, which sets democracy and freedom of the individual over against the coercion of institutions such as church and (monarchical or tyrannical) state. Despite the fact that both Romans and Christians declared themselves to be agents of divine justice, from the point of view of social control, their claims can only be treated as manipulative ideology. In this economy of individualism, social control is criticized as a functionalist use of tortured and humiliated bodies by often abstract entities, such as the Roman Empire or the Christian Church, to secure power for themselves—but at the cost of refusing agency and moral virtue to those who are being so used.

I want to argue, however, that social control assumes a problematic framework for understanding how power operates in the establishment, maintenance, and negotiation of social relations. A more adequate framework is suggested by current anthropological and sociological theory that insists that agency does not belong to abstract social entities

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62 He describes this process in more detail as follows: “The process was essentially as follows: to secure from its adherents the behavior which was necessary if the movement were to survive, rewards of a sufficiently compelling nature were held forth, so that in the person being examined, or likely to be examined, there would be generated a wish to maintain his present relation. Negative sanction was secured by threatening punishment for failure to do so. The desired goal was repeatedly called to attention by careful visualization. Its realization by others was frequently pictured as a glorious fact. Encouragement was given by the thought of participation of others in similar experiences, and it was pointed out that failure or success would be witnessed by one’s fellows. In specific detail proper attitudes were suggested, stock answers to the prospective questions were taught, and stereotyped arguments were supplied, together with persuasive evaluations and heroic imagery. The attempt was made to induce in the candidate an emotion of overpowering character, so that he might be carried if he had been sufficiently prepared, through the harrowing experience with a minimum of exception to the type of behavior which had been found to be desirable” (Riddle, *The Martyrs*, pp. 24-26, see also chapters 2-4 on the “Preparation of the Martyr,” “The Production of Attitudes,” and “The Influence of the Group”).

63 Strangely enough, Riddle does not, however, understand this kind of social control to be opposed to individualization. Rather he argues that the “basis of control” was the individual, by which he means that it is the individual rather than the social group who is promised salvation. He grounds this notion in an historical account, arguing that individualism arose in the Hellenistic world with the breakdown of social-political associations (city-state); Christianity became an individualistic religion of personal salvation as it separated from Judaism (which, in his view, based salvation on the common life of the group) (*The Martyrs*, 126-134). This position problematically offers a “universal” history of the kind we have considered above. It treats Judaism and Christianity as monolithic entities, and defines Christianity largely over against Judaism—here as individualism versus communalism. Rather, it is necessary to look at the specific situations in which a person is embedded within his/her social group(s) to answer questions about individualization. Over time and in different geographical locations and situations, Jews and Christians have articulated the relationship of individuals to the group in different ways. Moreover, as we have seen, ancient Christians characterized themselves as Christians in terms of group belonging, not personal salvation. Indeed the conception of Christianity as a religion of “personal salvation” (understood in terms of an individualistic notion of the self) is anachronistic for the Roman period.
or even to individual persons *per se*, but to situations. Agency is not located in controlling structures nor in the inner life of the autonomous individual or authorial subject, rather it “refers to the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act.”64 From the perspective of this kind of practice theory, human actions are both enabled and constrained by social norms, practices, institutions, and discourses operating in a given situation, such that people are neither entirely free agents nor entirely socially determined products. Crucial to this perspective is the notion of indeterminacy, that is, the inherent tensions, contradictions, excesses, and instabilities in any practice.65 Performance theory provides analytic categories, that while limited,66 are useful in bringing out the social dynamics of these practices (and their representations). As Gavin Brown writes:

“To speak of performance is to explore what is achieved in the very act of performing: action decoded as action, not only ideas in action.67 Performance is scripted action: it is never spontaneous or accidental, it is reliant on *a priori* cultural imagination. … Even so, no script can ever fully encapsulate the performance; there is a significant unscripted dimension in all performances. It is, like any mode of action, susceptible to contingency and indeterminacy; meaning constantly threatens to escape the structure of the performance.68

While indeterminacy makes negotiation and resistance possible, the scripted (ritualized) character of the performance also requires consent and appropriation in order for action to be not only effective but intelligible. Because of this indeterminacy, domination—or resistance—can never be total.69 Catherine Bell summarizes the point well when she writes: “the interaction of the social body with a structured and structuring environment, specifically affords the opportunity for consent and resistance and negotiated appropriation on a variety of levels.”70 Each of these terms is crucial to our discussion: interaction, social body, structured and structuring environment, consent, resistance, negotiation, appropriation. In the case of martyrdom, investigation would

64 Ahearn, “Language and Agency,” p. 120.
65 See also the discussion of “disorder” as inherent in (some) ritual by Dirks, “Ritual and Resistance.”
66 See, for example, Bell’s critique in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, pp. 42-46.
67 For more on ideas in action, see the discussion of Stanley Tambiah by Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, p. 41.
69 See the discussion of Ahearn, “Language and Agency,” esp. p. 120.
involve the spaces and types of interaction, specifying the social group and how social
terms and are structured by the acts of participants, as well as where we see consent, resistance, negotiation, and appropriation. This kind of framework shifts our attention from individuals to the social-political dynamics of the law court and the arena as places of public performance, and to the discourses of power, truth, and virtue operating in those spaces.

From this perspective, established social relations were not merely played out in the law court and the amphitheatre; rather these were sites where the field of social relations was constantly being differentiated and integrated, established and subverted.71 One way to highlight these social dynamics and the indeterminacy inherent in them is to examine representations of Roman interrogations and public executions as ritualized performances72 and spectacles.73 As Potter describes the scripted character of events in the arena:

“Public executions were rituals of great emotional force. The audiences expected to witness a series of events carried out in a particular order, and to witness behavior of a consistent type. They expected to see a picture of society’s power painted upon the canvas provided by the bodies of the condemned to the agents of the central government, they expected to see penitence and terror in the condemned, they expected to hear them scream, and they expected to see the terror in their faces as they confronted the beast or the other savage forms of execution which were employed in the arena. When the condemned did not display suitable contrition, the audience might demand additional flogging or torture. If, on the other hand, they thought that the authorities were exceeding their mandate, they might demand that the authorities change their behavior.”74

Law court interrogations, too, were carefully but loosely scripted by the Romans, giving considerable latitude for the Roman magistrate both in the precise questions of the

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71 As Bell puts it, “ritual systems do not function to regulate or control the systems of social relations, they are the system” (Ritual Theory. Ritual Practice, p. 130). The previous sentence paraphrases her: “In other words, the more or less practical organization of ritual activities neither acts upon nor reflects the social system; rather, these loosely coordinated activities are constantly differentiating and integrating, establishing and subverting the field of social relations” (ibid, p. 130).
72 For discussion of martyrdom as ritual, see for example, Young, In Procession before the World.
73 Much recent work is being done on the issue of martyrdom and spectacle; see e.g., Coleman, “Fatal Charades”; Frilingos, Spectacles of Empire; Gleason, “Truth Contests”; Castelli, Martyrdom and Memory, pp. 104-133; Bowersock, Martyrdom and Rome, pp. 41-57; Kyle, Spectacles of Death. On honor and shame, see esp. Barton, “Savage Miracles.”
74 Potter, “Martyrdom as Spectacle,” p. 53.
interrogation and (somewhat) in his sentencing. But the Romans were less able to script the responses of those being accused—and this indeterminacy turned the interrogation into a dramatic contest about truth. Set types of performances were offered in the amphitheatre, including athletic competitions and gladiatorial fights as well as the dramatic public executions of criminals, but again the Romans were not always fully able to force the condemned to play their prescribed roles—in the case of condemned Christians, for example, the roles of subdued and shamed criminals, marked by appropriate displays of fear and grief. Because of this indeterminacy, these loosely structured contests were particularly fecund sites for Christians to cast themselves in different roles—as figures of virtue, victorious athletes and gladiators rather than as depraved slaves, criminals and victims—by devising and performing alternative scripts, both in how they responded to interrogation, accusations, insults, and torture, and in how they died. Audiences, too, were important actors in these dramas, not merely passive observers. Their response to the actions of those in the arena and to the authorities in charge could signal not only whether the performance was effective, but they could also influence some outcomes—whether a gladiator be killed or spared; how a criminal might be treated, and so forth. The Christians’ actions could pose scripting dilemmas for audiences whose role as judges was to affirm the basic aims of the Roman script by acknowledging events of the law court and amphitheatre as displays of legitimate Roman authority and justice. Christians sought to put the expected response of the audience into doubt, and even to “convert” them to the Christian scripting.

Much was at stake for Christians in these contests, for although their lives were forfeit from the moment they refused to sacrifice, the truth of their beliefs and way of life, their innocence of the criminal charges, and indeed their very humanity remained at issue. To quote Potter again:

75 Both these elements of fixity and fluidity are in evidence in the extant records (see Bisbee, Pre-Decian Acts of Martyrs).
76 The precise legal charges are not clear, and most likely varied from emperor to emperor and sometimes in different geographical areas, but the most frequent suggestions involve treason, atheism and/or immorality, superstition. The more precise reasons for why the Christians were persecuted are also debated; see the Pliny-Trajan correspondence (Pliny, Ep. X.96-97); Sherwin-White, “The Jewish Persecutions and Roman Law Again”; de Ste-Croix and White debate in Finley (ed.) Studies in Ancient Society, pp. 210-255; Selinger, The Mid-Third Century Persecutions; Lieu, “Accusations of Jewish Persecution.”
“A trial was one thing but death in the arena was another matter. It was a political as well as a judicial ritual, a ceremony which served to reinforce the existing power structure by reducing the condemned to the level of an object. … A person sentenced to die in the arena lost human identity, lost control of his or her body, became a slave. … According to Gaius, ‘those condemned to the extreme penalty immediately lose their citizenship and freedom. This fate anticipates their death…’; they cease to exist at [sic] human beings. … The criminal was not on a par with the great figures who won fame and fortune as athletes and gladiators. The condemned was a prop, deprived of self, something for the real stars to play with.”77

Note that loss of humanity is equated with being a slave—a status of social death familiar to everyone in the Roman world. Such persons were subjected to whatever treatment their owners desired, including sexual access, tortures, and a wide variety of indignities.

Christians countered this ritualized performance, in which they were forced to play the roles of “props” in the drama, by dying well, a practice already highly valorized in Roman philosophical discourse. As Seneca wrote, “One who has learned to die has unlearned slavery. He is superior to all powers, and certainly beyond their reach. What to him are prison, guards, and fetters? He has an open door.”78 In order for this strategic resistance to work, however, Christians had to be able to display their fearlessness under acute trials and suffering. Audacious behavior and speech would not be enough; it was the final moment of death that was crucial.79 Seneca makes the point quite clearly: “Death will pronounce judgment on you. I say this: debates and erudite conversations and collected sayings from the precepts of philosophers do not reveal true strength of mind. Even the most fearful can make a brave speech. What you have achieved will be revealed at the moment when you send forth your spirit.”80 Lucretius agrees: “So it is more helpful to examine someone in dangerous peril and to learn in harsh circumstances what kind of person they are; for only then are true words drawn from the depths of the

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77 Potter, “Martyrdom as Spectacle,” p. 65.
79 The following discussion depends heavily upon the excellent study of Catherine Edwards, Death in Ancient Rome. Although her analysis focuses on Lucretius, Cicero and Seneca, her results arguably display a set of attitudes that were widespread.
heart. The mask is pulled off, the reality remains.”81 Death alone will reveal a person’s character beyond doubt.

Choosing to die was also a pre-eminent way to display one’s freedom from all domination. As Edwards documents, Seneca and Tacitus both associated death with libertas. This kind of thinking drew deeply from Stoic moral philosophy, in which “freedom ... had come to have the sense of ‘total independence of the person from all the passions and from all wrong desires’.”82 Such thinking highly valued agency—the capacity for choice based on rational deliberation and judgment—, and understood dying well as perhaps the one action possible no matter how constrained one’s circumstances. Such a display was possible no matter what a person’s social status or circumstance; dying well was something that high and low, men and women, young and old could accomplish. By choosing to die well, the slave and the criminal asserted their freedom beyond the power of authorities. Edwards argues that in this way, death could have “a specifically political message,” since choosing one’s own death proved that “tyrants have power over no one.” 83

This is clearly one of the messages of MPF. The author repeatedly presents the Christians as the authors of their own fates, asserting their identity as Christians against the admonitions and opinions of Roman officials, jailors, crowds, and family. Both Origen and MPF teach that Christians should be willing to give themselves up freely to the authorities (even volunteering themselves as Saturus does84), to surrender all their legal and social standing, and even to display signs of joy in facing wild beasts and executioners, and cooperating with them, as Perpetua does when she guides the sword to her neck and as Saturus and others do in taunting the governor in the arena. We can see here perhaps the kind of theatricality Marcus Aurelius found so distasteful when he commented:

“What a soul is that which is ready to be released from the body at any requisite moment, whether to be quenched or dissipated or to survive (συμμεινατί)! But

81 Lucretius De rerum natura 3.1039-42; cited from Edwards, p. 84.
83 Edwards, Death in Ancient Rome, p. 103.
84 Perpetua tells us that Saturus turned himself in (MPF 4.5, pp. 110-111), and once in prison, the author displays him as speaking and acting provocatively, warning onlookers of God’s judgement and ridiculing their curiosity (MPF 17; pp. 124-125).
the readiness must spring from one’s inner judgement (ιδικής κρίσεως), and not be the result of mere opposition [as is the case with the Christians]. It must be associated with deliberation (λεγόμενος) and dignity and, if others too are to be convinced, with nothing like stage-heroics (ατραγωδος).85

At the least, the portrait of Saturus in MPF represents him as performing the role of martyr with great relish and grand gestures. From beginning to end, these Christians are portrayed as active participants in the events of their own destruction—to the point where modern scholars have discussed whether to classify at least some of these deaths as suicides, especially given that self-killing could have a positive valence as an honorable death for Greeks and Romans.86 But honorable death is surely the point here, and it is clearly a political point for Christians, as well as a matter of displaying their moral character.

As we have seen, it was the Romans who unwittingly made the spectacle of Christian virtue possible. They of course had their own political ends in view, setting up the tribunal and the arena as spaces in which they could offer demonstrations of their power, as well claim legitimate authority. Those who were executed were criminals and enemies of the empire, often low-class persons and foreigners. In killing them, the emperor and his representatives were demonstrating their dutiful capacity to maintain peace and order for Rome’s subjects. It was crucial for the accused and condemned to play their proper roles. The former should either confess and offer signs of remorse or prove their innocence; the latter should demonstrate grief and especially fear. Cowardly behavior demonstrated a weak moral character that confirmed the unlawful behavior of such persons, hence it was important that the condemned display fear in order to testify to

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85 Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 11.3 (text and trans. Haines, Loeb. ed., p. 294-295, modified). The brackets indicate some question among scholars about whether or not the enclosed words are a later addition. But whether or not that is the case, the point holds with regard to Saturus: Would his death have been seen by the Roman administrators and the audience as marked by inner judgement, deliberation, and dignity or by sheer opposition and theatrics?

86 See especially the discussion of Droge and Tabor, A Noble Death; Middleton, Radical Martyrdom. Ancient philosophers did not question that a person could take his/her own life, but they did discuss what would be the proper motivations, circumstances, and behaviors. There was some discussion among ancient Christians as well about the proper motives for true martyrdom and whether a person ought to volunteer for martyrdom, but suicide as such was apparently not condemned until Augustine. Until then the question revolved around how to understand whether God had elected a person for martyrdom or not. The negative examples of persons who gave themselves up, but then were unable to go ahead with it were shown as examples that unless God wills a death, it will not succeed—and indeed if God does will such a death, it cannot be avoided.
the justice of Roman order. The law court and the arena offered contests of truth and virtue, but the Roman authorities expected to win. Audiences maintained the position as judges—and hence actors, not mere passive sponges of the ideology played out before them—but they, too, were deeply implicated in assenting to the Roman drama and maintaining its ideologies and structures of domination. Christians are often treated as resisters, but they, too, are actors in the ritualized drama. As Bell puts it, “ritual systems do not function to regulate or control the systems of social relations, they *are* the system.” From this kind of practice theory perspective, Christians are not outside the Roman system opposing it, rather they are actively appropriating its “rules” and strategies, but for their own ends. The Romans may torture them and put them to death, but they cannot (fully) determine Christians’ behavior within those (extreme) limits. Within this restricted scope of action, Christians sought to rewrite the system of ancient social relations through their own ritualized embodiment in torture and execution.

Moreover, because ancients agreed that the capacity to develop a firm moral character had to be based upon true beliefs and reasoned judgments, fearlessness in death testified not only to a person’s character but to the truth of one’s beliefs. Christian literature clearly is framed to represent the fearless, indeed joyful, deaths of martyrs as public demonstrations of the truth of Christian teaching and way of life. The actual spectacles would, however, have had at most a limited capacity to convey anything about Christians beyond their courage (or their audacity in opposing just law and piety, depending upon one’s viewpoint). As Judith Perkins has emphasized, a survey of the surviving ancient literature indicates that “if Christianity was known at all (to pagans), it was known for its adherents’ attitude toward death and suffering.” For some, however, this attitude was apparently enough for them to seek out Christians and learn more—an end the Romans no doubt did not intend.

By understanding agency not as the property of individuals but as a function of the production of power and the shaping of social relations in specific situations, it is possible to reconsider how we might talk about the representations of Perpetua and other Christians as martyrs. The emphasis placed upon free choice and courageous conduct by

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87 Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, p. 130.
Origen and the author of *MPF* have to be understood in terms of discourses of moral perfection and the specific situational structures of the law court and amphitheatre. By analyzing them as sites for ritualized spectacle, it becomes possible to see how the Roman arrangement of interrogations, tortures, and executions opened indeterminate spaces in which Christians could (to a limited degree) shape their own roles in the drama, and thereby simultaneously reshape the structure of social relations that were at stake.\(^89\)

In these situations, Christians were able to display the truth of Christian beliefs and way of life by “dying well”—but to convey this message Christians had to appropriate and redeploy the dominant cultural codes, moral discourses, and performance strategies that were devised by the Romans precisely to display Christians as criminals and enemies of the social order. The acts of the Christian martyrs functioned less to distinguish Christians from Roman society than to integrate them within it—but on their own terms, terms which hierarchically subordinated the Roman emperor and his subjects to and under the gaze of God. In the process, they (re)formed (a particular version of) Christianity itself—not as an abstract entity, but in and through particular, ritualized bodies in a particular time-space.\(^90\)

This Christian “rescripting” was intelligible only because the Roman script was widely and clearly recognized. While the “scripted” character of the “performance”—or even calling it “ritual”—may seem to undercut the notion of individual action/agency and speak more of the social-convention functions of martyrdom, the indeterminacy of social practices is one way to talk about how such practices are always active constructions of social relations, not mere repetitions or reinscriptions of them. As such, they allow for relations to be altered, negotiated, and resisted through the acts of particular persons. Because social relations are not merely reproduced, but shaped through such ritualized

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\(^89\) Thus Bell: “ritual does not disguise the exercise of power, nor does it refer, express, or symbolize anything outside itself. ... Ritual is the thing itself [politics]. It is power; it acts and it actuates” (*Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, p. 195). “In ritualization, power is not external to its workings; it exists only insofar as it is constituted with and through the lived body, which is both the body of society and the social body. Ritualization is a strategic play of power, of domination and resistance, within the arena of the social body” (ibid, p. 204).

\(^90\) See the discussion of Bell: “(W)hat ritualization does is actually quite simple: it temporally structures a space-time environment through a series of physical movements..., thereby producing an arena which, by its molding of the actors, both validates and extends the schemes they are internalizing. Indeed, in seeing itself as responding to an environment, ritualization interprets its own schemes as impressed upon the actors from a more authoritative source, usually from well beyond the human community itself” (*Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, pp. 109-110).
productions, the potential for social change by “disruptions” in the law court or arena is considerable. Because such performances were staged in public, not only the government officials and the condemned Christians, but the entire Christian community, the local civic audience, the jailors, gladiators, executioners, animal keepers, and other participants were potentially involved in reordering social relations. Certainly the martyr literature required Christian (or prospective Christian) readers to remap their own social relations, not only in terms of their membership in the Christian group, but to understand that being Christian required a (potential) reorientation of one’s entire social network, including imperial and civic authorities, local communities (including neighbors, so-called patronage relations, etc. participation in public festivals etc.), and families (domestic relations, including master-slave relations).

The discussion thus far has yet to take up the question of religious change. For both the Romans and the Christians, the drama of power and truth being performed was one in which the gods/God were understood not only as a (or even the) prime audience,91 but as actors. How does that perspective affect the analysis of agency and individualization?

Instrumental Agency and the Limited Scope of Choice

Most academic frameworks of analysis have no place for God on the map of social relations, relegating theological matters to (delusional) ideology or symbolism. That absence would, however, significantly distort the representation of the dynamics given by Origen, the author of MPF, or Perpetua’s own account. For them, God alone is represented as an entirely free and powerful agent; it is God who fulfills his promises and gives witness, who condemns their oppressors and grants salvation to faithful believers. The martyr is always God’s instrument.92 In MPF, readers are told that people of weak

91 Origen, for example, writes of the Maccabeans: “An when because of the savagery of the tyrant, vapour was given forth by the flesh of the most noble champion of faith as he was being roasted, the rest, together with the mother, exhorted one another to die manfully, consoling themselves with the thought that God saw all these things. The conviction that the eye of God was watching over their sufferings was sufficient assurance for their constancy. And the Judge of the champions of faith comforted them, comforted Himself, and so to say, rejoiced with them for struggling against such great sufferings. If we find ourselves in like pains, it would be well for us to say what they said to one another: The Lord God looks upon us and takes please in the truth in us” (ExMart 23; O’Meara, p. 164).

92 This point is one made by many scholars. Chadwick, for example, writes: “The martyr’s conflict was seen not as a fight against duly constituted authority in government, but against Satan. It was a struggle in
and despairing faith are able to submit willingly and joyfully to torture and humiliation only by receiving “supernatural grace.”93 It is within this framework that the martyrs are represented as exhibiting the capacity for choice and agency. The martyrs’ courage and steadfastness do not come from within these persons themselves as autonomous individuals, but from God’s grace and empowerment.

Their instrumental capacity is demonstrated not only in the use of their bodies to proclaim the glory and power of their God by gladly suffering torture and death, but also in the visions of Perpetua and Saturus. Such dreams are not understood as the products of their individual psyches, but as divine action on a receptive soul-mind. The visions offer certainty that all is happening according to God’s will; they will suffer and die in the arena, but God will grant them victory and eternal life. Indeed, the Christians apparently believed that publically confessing to be a Christian would make people into particularly powerful agents of God. Perpetua, for example, believes she is a prophet able to communicate directly with God, to secure the welfare of her deceased brother, who had been in pain but after her intervention appears to her in a dream happy and “cured,”94 and to have the strength and skill to win the contest of the arena against the (seemingly) overwhelming power of the Roman state. Saturus, too, indicates confidence in his efficacy. Trying to convert a soldier name Pudens, he asked for Pudens’ ring, dipped it into his wound, and then returned it “as a pledge and as a record of his bloodshed.”95 What exactly Saturus hoped to achieve by this act is not clear to me, but he seems to think that his blood has some special efficacy. How much of this portrait belongs to MPF’s author and how much to Saturus is not clear, but the account Saturus gives of his own vision indicates his high expectation of heavenly regard. In his dream, he is not only welcomed in heaven with homage from the angels, but the Lord Himself

which the heroic confessor of the faith was understood to be uniquely assisted by the Spirit of God, and more than one account tells of the ‘victims’ being granted visions to strengthen them. In fact the extant Acts of the Martyrs (where based on contemporary records and not legends) do not portray the martyrs as human heroes, but as very frail mortals who are being given supernatural strength” (“The Early Christian Community,” p. 51). So, too, Miles writes: “Christians did not regard martyrdom as ‘heroic’ in the ordinary sense. Martyrdom accounts assumed that a person cannot approach shameful death with peace and joy except by a special grace. If a confessor was not given this grace, s/he was unable to maintain her/his confession” (The Word Made Flesh, 21).

93 See MPF 1.5.21-25 (pp. 106-107).
94 See MPF 7-8 (pp. 114-117).
95 See MPF 21.5 (pp. 130-131).
(the aged man with the young face) touches him with His hand. Then a bishop and presbyter accept his authority and ask for his patronage. Saturus takes this dream as an assurance that his behavior will secure him not only eternal life, but a position of great prestige in heaven that exceeds even that of the bishop.

How should we view this kind of instrumental agency? First of all, we have to understand these representations of instrumental agency within the social dynamics operating in the law court and arena. In the contests staged in these spaces, people are all represented as agents of their respective deities: Romans and Christians. At stake in the contest is whose gods/God are truly divine and what these gods/God demand. The Roman condemnation of Christians as traitors, atheists, and criminals makes clear their point of view. In the Christian scenario, the dramatic contest between Roman and Christian is staged as a battle between the instruments of Satan and God, between idolatry and true worship. Origen admonishes his readers that not only humans, but also the angels of God and the powers of the lower world will be watching and judging their performance; the cosmos itself will rejoice if they win the contest. From this

96 For a discussion of instrumental agency, see Ahearn, “Language and Agency”; Asad, Formations of the Secular, 67-124; but esp. Keller, The Hammer and the Flute. Keller writes: “Consistently when scholars propose interpretations of possession, they have done so as if possession were symbolic of an individual’s psychosocial situation. In reorienting the study of possession, we recognize the embodied discipline and practices that develop moral capabilities. This means understanding ritual as instrumental activity, constitutive of identity. … To date, possessions have by and large been interpreted as symbols rather than as disciplinary practices that produce knowledge and develop moral capabilities. This shift toward an analysis of the power and knowledge produced through disciplinary does not, however, eliminate our ability to interrogate how these practices have an impact on individual bodies. Instead, the shift makes a distinction between individual bodies that function within systems of power and individuals—the autonomous agents who constitute the progressive march of Western history” (The Hammer and the Flute, p. 65). Ahearn notes: “…it is important to avoid treating agency as a synonym for free will or resistance. One fruitful direction for future research may be to begin to distinguish among types of agency—oppositional agency, complicit agency, agency of power, agency of intention, etc.—while also recognizing that multiple types are exercised in any given action. By doing this, we might gain a more thorough understanding of the ‘complex and ambiguous agency’ that always surrounds us” (“Language and Agency,” p. 130. )

97 The Romans can be seen as instrumental agents as well. The Emperor is the supreme instrument of the gods—the point where the emperor cult blurs the line with divinity altogether. The Roman authorities are more directly the instrumental agents of the Emperor, as well as fulfilling the destiny granted them by the gods.

98 Origen writes: “A great multitude is assembled to watch you when you combat and are called to martyrdom. It is as if we said that thousands upon thousands gather to watch a contest in which contestants of outstanding reputation are engaged. When you will be engaged in the conflict you can say with Paul: We are made a spectacle to the world and to angels and to men (1 Cor 4:9). The whole world, therefore, all the angels of the right and on the left, all men, both those on the side of God and the others—all will hear us fighting the fight for Christianity. Either the angels in heaven will rejoice over jus, and the rivers shall clap their hands, the mountains shall rejoice together, and all the trees of the plain shall clap their
perspective, the scope of potential religious change is enormous. Because Romans based the legitimacy of their authority on their piety toward the gods and the gods’ favor to them, religious resistance challenged the entire hierarchical structure of social relations. It is widely recognized that in antiquity the playing field of religion (in Bourdieu’s terms) was not merely a matter of domestic (“private”) practices, but was embedded in political and economic activities, as well as ethnic identity, social status, and family relations. As we know from hindsight, the Christian project would (audaciously) seek to reform each of these spheres under the gaze of their God. In her writing, as well as in MPF’s author’s representation of her speech and actions, Perpetua effects a reordering of imperial and familial relations in which God is placed over (and against) Roman claims to power, and her natal family is replaced with Christian “family.” Eventually, these and other disciplined bodily practices will substantively change the social order. We know from hindsight that enormous changes were wrought in the name of Christianity over the next centuries, in every aspect of social-political life, including transformed notions of suffering and selfhood, obedience and resistance to power and authority, understandings of sexuality, family, and ethnicity.

Given the narrow scope of Perpetua’s choice—to sacrifice or die—these consequences for social and religious change are shocking in their scope. They can be accounted for only when agency is analyzed as a function of the indeterminate, embodied discourses and structures of particular situations, and when we shift our attention from the motives and choices of single individuals to the effective agency of writing and representation.

Modern readers are perhaps so used to the notion that martyrs are heroes, individuals of exemplary moral and spiritual power and agency (or that they are psychologically disturbed and intellectually manipulated fools), that it is easy to overlook the ways in which Christians themselves struggled to affirm the ultimate value and full humanity of naked, tortured bodies that much more obviously demonstrated shame and defeat. Perpetua’s choice to die is represented as a choice for life. While her decision is described most explicitly as the choice to give up a frail mortality for the surety of branches—or—and God forbid that it should happen—the powers of the lower world will gloat over our crime and will be glad” (ExMart 18; O’Meara, p. 158).

See here particularly the exemplary work of Buell, Making Christians and Why This New Race.
immortal life, it also offers insight into ancient notions of what was required in order to become fully human in a society where that was the privilege of a few.

We cannot know why Perpetua initially joined the Christians, we can only see where it led. We do not know if motherhood, family roles, and civic duties as a Roman matron were burdensome to her or if she accepted them willingly. She tells us that her father “alone of all my kin would be unhappy to see me suffer.” Her husband, as many have noted, is notably absent from the extant portions of her diary; was he, too, not unhappy to see her suffer? We only know that her child, her legal status, her dignity, and her life were forcibly taken from her by a system in which the only alternative to obedience was utter and brutal dehumanization. Within the structure of ancient discourse, it would seem her only “choice” was to accept these losses—with glad fortitude as befits one who has overcome the passions—or to surrender to grief.

But the Christian martyr story offers a very different picture. The situation of her arrest, trial, imprisonment, and execution are portrayed as opportunities for the practice of disciplines that produce knowledge and develop moral capacities. While she is cut off from one set of social relations, she takes on those of another, moving from one social positioning to another. In the Christian group, she is accepted as a sister, and honored as a valued prophet and confessor. She has the power to overcome not just the gladiator who will kill her, but the system of dehumanization that threatened everything she has (apparently) come to value. The story of MPF affirms her full humanity, as a moral person, a spiritual exemplum, athlete, and combatant, and a valued member of the family of God.

Such lessons were not for the dead, but for the living, for teaching people how it is possible to maintain one’s humanity in a system that regularly devalued and dehumanized persons, through slavery, sexual abuse, public humiliation, torture, and execution. Literary representations of the martyrs’ fearlessness in death are intended to show that even dehumanizing torture and violent execution could not diminish their full humanity. Perpetua’s choice displays all that most deeply defined her as a human being: her moral integrity, her communications with God, her honored status in the Christian

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100 MPF 5.6 (p. 112-113).
101 See the summary of the discussion by Salisbury, Perpetua’s Passion, 8.
102 See especially the discussion of Tertullian, Exhortation to Martyrdom 2-3.
community, the intense relations of trust and affection with her fellow Christians, her belief in divine justice and truth. As an instrumental agent, Perpetua embodied and enacted divine truth and justice; from the Christian perspective, she was God acting in the world.

What Kind of God is This?

What kind of God is this for whom Perpetua acted as an instrument? What kind of God requires his children to suffer such horrible and humiliating deaths in order to affirm their humanity and glorify his Name? As we saw at the beginning of this essay, Christians disputed not only with the Romans, but with each other about the nature of the gods/God and their/His demands. Thus far it could seem that we have been talking as though there were a singular, homogenous ideology and set of practices in ancient Christianity, referred to in short-hand as “martyrdom” and represented by Origen and MPG—and indeed there is considerable coherence among some early Christian literature. This impression, however, would historically speaking be inaccurate. Christians themselves were deeply engaged in articulating the theological meaning of their suffering and violent deaths at the hands of the Romans, and they disagreed, sometimes stridently and angrily, with each other about what to think and what to do.

These disputes are already evidenced in the writings of theologians such as Irenaeus and Tertullian, but manuscripts discovered in Egypt over the last century provide more specific evidence of the content of these disputes. To describe these controversies adequately would require much more space than the topic can be given

103 This coherence should not, however, be overstated. Even among the literature that was included within the bounds of what became Christian orthodoxy, there is considerable theological and practical diversity. Moreover, MPG, for example, offers much more clearly a set of practices of moral development than the content of Christian faith/teaching. What would we know of her beliefs if this text were the only knowledge we had of Christianity? Perpetua is portrayed as an exemplum of Christian faith, but the content of that faith is surprising: images of a shepherd giving her milk and a leader crowning her with victory, stepping on the head of a dragon and defeating a fearsome gladiator. In her own writing, we hear of no imitation of a suffering and dying Christ, no language of atoning sacrifice or sin and repentance, and other Christian teaching that were to become fundamental are similarly absent. This may be a function of the genre, but the works discussed below, such as The Letter of Peter to Philip and The Apocryphon of James, are also “preparation for martyrdom” literature, but include considerably more theological instruction.

104 One of the most angry voices can be heard in the recently published Gospel of Judas (see Pagels and King, esp. pp. 33-75). See also the discussion of Koschorke, Die Polemik.
here, but it is important to at least mention them because so much was at stake in what Christianity became.

Several of these rediscovered works can be considered as “preparation for martyrdom” and, like Origen and MPF, they stress the need to receive true teaching given by Jesus’s revelation in order to overcome the passions of grief and fear. They stress, too, that only the teachings of Jesus bring certain knowledge of God, and these teachings must be preached to the whole world for human salvation. But they disagree on (at least) two points that are crucial for our discussion. I offer a brief discussion of The Letter of Peter to Philip as an example.

First, while Christians like those who wrote The Letter of Peter to Philip accepted that believers must suffer and be killed, they did not believe that in themselves such humiliations and tortures brought salvation, or even special status before God. Rather such consequences arose from preaching the gospel in a world ruled by violent and arrogant demigods. These Christians denied that violence of any kind was part of God’s plan, and hence their writings offer no images of the judgement or punishment of those who oppressed them. Second, they did not believe that immortality included the resurrection of the fleshly material body. While they could affirm that Jesus had indeed come in the flesh, truly suffered and died, his resurrection proved that human beings are fundamentally spiritual beings, not fleshly. By rising from the dead, he exposed the impotence and deception of the powers that attempted to keep people enslaved to their worldly rule, and he showed people the way to return to God.

As with the other Christian literature we have examined, a central function of these texts is the formation of the self as a specifically Christian self. The Letter of Peter to Philip, for example, emphasizes a way of life based on moral development through overcoming the passions, practices of evangelism as the central activity of the Christian way of life, and accepting correct teaching about the nature of God, the cosmos, and

105 Particularly relevant are The Testimony of Truth, The Apocalypse of Peter, I and II Apocalypse of James, The Apocryphon of James, The Gospel of Mary, and The Letter of Peter to Philip. For more detailed discussion of the texts and topics of this paragraph, see King “Martyrdom and Its Discontents in the Tchacos Codex” and “Toward a Discussion of the Category of Gnosis.”
106 The results given here are argued at length in “Toward a Discussion.” The Letter of Peter to Philip is preserved in Coptic translation in two fourth century manuscripts; for texts and English translations, see Meyer, “NHC VIII,2” and Kasser et al., The Gospel of Judas.
107 See Marjanen, “The Suffering of One.”
humanity as necessary for salvation. (In this latter sense, this kind of Christianity was not more “rationalized” than other forms).

How does this controversy impact our question of individualization? As we have seen, in antiquity it was understood that a person becomes only fully human by a living virtuously in accord with a true account (revelation) of the “way things are.” For all Christians, this meant a clear differentiation from the hegemonic religious-political-social norms of their social contexts. The Romans greatly aided this “differentiation” by killing them for professing Christianity, but at the same time these public displays put theological issues into play that were crucial to Christian teaching about what it meant to be fully human. For Origen and MPF, one’s full humanity was embodied in facing death fearlessly; for LetPetPhil, one’s full humanity was embodied in a way of life that rejected the body as the self. In this way, the self was more fully “interiorized” and simultaneously “divinized”—not in the sense of modern individualism, but in that a person became fully human by conforming to a transcendent nature not bound by the restrictions of materiality, political power, or conventional social-economic roles. Such people practiced the transcendent life in the daily world—a radical kind of relationship of the individual to society. This way of life, too, would have significant implications for social and religious change in late antique Roman society, as it provided *exempla* vis-à-vis monastic and mystical traditions within Christianity.\(^{108}\)

**Concluding Reflections**

By focusing the questions of religious individualization upon the scope for action presented in literary representations of ancient Christian martyrdom, the first conclusion concerns misreading Christian martyrs as heroic individuals. Ancient notions of the person emphasized the development of character and virtuous action in the context of social relations, including dialogue to secure a rational basis for thought and action. Origen and MPF both understood martyrdom as a rational choice and urged readers to prepare themselves for martyrdom by practicing true piety and cultivating virtue. The portraits of the martyrs were offered as ekphrastic *exempla* for imitation. They are heroes, but not in the modern sense. Gill has argued that figures like Homer’s Achilles or

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\(^{108}\)It is thus no surprise that the Nag Hammadi collection was found near a Pachomian monastery
Euripides’ Media should not be viewed as “self-assertive individuals, radically questioning or rejecting communal or shared human standards,” but rather “their non-standard actions should be seen as ‘exemplary gestures’, designed to dramatize, and protest at, exceptional breaches in communal or common human norms.” So, too, the representations (and self-representations) of Perpetua and Saturus are better seen in this light. The story of their deaths is meant to point toward exceptional breaches in commonly held notions of justice and piety, notions that the Romans themselves propagated but did not always live up to. It was by exemplifying and appealing to “communal or shared human standards,” such as overcoming the passions and displaying noble death, that Christian martyrs attempted to persuade their audiences of the truth of their beliefs and way of life. They are not rejecting, but employing oppositional strategies within the discursive frameworks of their social-political world.

They accomplished these exemplary deaths, not through their own agency, but as instruments of God. This representation of instrumental agency can only be analyzed by leaving behind inadequate individualistic notions of existential autonomy, and understanding that agency is a function of specific situations, not the possession of individuals. If we remove God as an active agent—indeed the only truly “free agent” in the story—we misconstrue the social dynamics at work in the Roman law-court and arena. Christians were able to “rationalize” their choice to die only through a new imagination of “the ways things are”—that their God is the true God; that the battle is one of God versus Satan; that by standing against idolatry, they stand on the side of truth; that choosing to die for God is a choice for eternally blessed life; that dishonor in the eyes of the world is glory in the eyes of God. How one died would display the truth—of whose gods/God, whose justice, whose virtues were true. Christians tried to persuade the audience, not by asking viewers to accept some abstract creed of a transcendent God, but by embodying the truth indisputably in their way of life—and death. The Romans had set up this cruel game in their favor, but the Christians were playing to win. If the gods/God were not real players, the entire performance would not have been intelligible to any of its participants.

Much was at stake. Christians are affirming their ultimate value and full humanity precisely at the point where they are most endangered by dehumanizing practices of public humiliation, physical torture, and the requirement to betray both one’s most cherished beliefs and one’s most intimate social group, as indeed by the very loss of life itself. It is at the point of extreme constraint, in situations of intolerable oppression of torture and religious persecution, that the question of what constitutes full humanity and human flourishing becomes articulated. For ancient Christian martyrs, the choice to affirm their full humanity—to resist and overcome dehumanization—meant not to choose “death” but to imagine and embody the conditions under which life is possible and without which human flourishing is not possible.

It seems to me that these early Christians are attempting to imagine and embody a way of living free from terror, torture, and humiliation; they are trying to form a community which affirms that full human life is possible, even in a world where ignorance, injustice, and violence rule. We have to question, however, how successful this attempt was. The criticisms implied by theories of social control, by descriptions of martyrs as suicides, and perhaps most especially by the Christians’ own imagination of vengeance against their oppressors should give pause. Was this new style of relating the individual to society more tolerant, more rational, or more humane than what had come before? Certainly Christians insisted that their beliefs and way of life Christian martyrs were insisting that their mode of life and belief was the only one that could lead to a person’s full moral development and humanity, for it alone was based on rational deliberation of immutable divine truth. Whether such a choice to die for God is rational, as Origen claims it is, depends very much on the rationale and opportunities of the situation. In the case of Roman persecution of Christians, avoiding violence was not an option, and here I include not only physical violence but dehumanization in its many forms. And although early Christian literature includes many admonitions against revenge,110 images of Christians’ courageously standing up to Roman torture and persecution were often coupled with fiery diatribes describing the punishments God

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110 See, for example, I Peter 3:9; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* IV.4 (14.1).
would wreak on their oppressors. Indeed, it was not long after Constantine’s conversion before Christians themselves persecuted heretics and non-believers.

The Christian imagination of one’s full humanity was developed in contexts in which violence was an inextricable element. In this discursive and practical context, the martyr who endures more, suffers more, is the one who is more highly exalted. Pain become tied to power, and human dignity to (seeking or enduring) violent death. Such views, as we have seen, did not go unchallenged. Christians like those who wrote the Letter of Peter to Philip attempted to articulate a theological vision of reality in which God neither desired nor rewarded violence and suffering. Yet such views, while not disappearing from the tradition, were subordinated to practices that placed Jesus’ suffering and death, and those of his followers, at the center of “salvation history.” Jesus’ own teachings were not lost, but they, too, have often taken second place to the powerful dramas of torture and courage that so deeply touched needs for affirmation, meaning, and belonging in the face of dehumanizing social worlds. It was these images of God-given honor and courage in the face of brutal tyranny that went far toward the religious and social changes that characterize the transformation of the Roman empire into the Christian world. Yet other voices that condemned the heroizing of exemplary suffering and violence, or who offered alternative “rationalizations” for persecution were preserved in the tradition itself. These stories left continuously open the possibility of imagining a person’s relation to any political or social group as a temporary arrangement, a matter of choice, superseded by commitment to a higher society—belonging to the kingdom of God.

111 See, for example, Revelation; Tertullian, de Spec 30.
112 See the discussion of Gaddis, There is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ; Grigg, Making Martyrs. Note, too, Grigg’s observation: “It is important to note here that the use of torture is not criticized on principle by any writer, Christian or otherwise” (64).
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