Dying for the Dawn

Martyrs, Narratives and Social Change in 20th Century Latin America

Edited by

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Universidad Iberoamericana-Mexico City, Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia-DEH, Mexico

Series in Sociology

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"Dying for the Dawn" offers an evocative, rigorous, and timely exploration of the multifaceted meanings and expressions of martyrdom in Latin America. Situating the region as a fertile terrain for examining the religious, social, and political forces that shape martyrial figures and narratives, the book illuminates how martyrdom continues to inform struggles over memory, justice, and political transformation. Highly interdisciplinary and accessible, the book establishes martyrdom as a vital lens for understanding Latin America's histories of conflict, resistance, and social change.

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University College Cork, Ireland
Author of "In the Vortex of Violence: Lynching, Extralegal Justice, and the State in Post-Revolutionary Mexico"

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Introduction

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The evolving concept of martyrdom from classical antiquity, the Middle Ages, the early modern era, and contemporary Western and Latin American contexts has been explored by historians for over a century. Much has been said about the multiple ways in which martyrdom has been constructed, interpreted, and memorialized in religious, political, and cultural spheres. Derived from the Greek *martyr* (witness), the concept has been a central theme in axial religious and cultural narratives, signifying ultimate sacrifice for faith, ideology, or community. The scholarly understanding of martyrdom from its origins in classical antiquity through its development in Christian, Jewish, and secular contexts, and its contemporary manifestations, addresses how martyrdom serves as a tool for identity formation, resistance, and collective memory, with a focus on Latin American examples to highlight modern Western dynamics which tie social practices, symbols, meaning creation and forms of political legitimacy and social identitary formations

In classical antiquity, martyrdom emerged as a concept tied to philosophical and religious ideals of sacrifice. The deaths of figures like Socrates (399 BCE), who chose death over abandoning his principles, laid the groundwork for later martyrological narratives (Plato, *Apology*, cited in Moss 2012). Early Jewish martyrdom, as seen in the Maccabean revolt (second century BCE), emphasized resistance to Hellenistic oppression (2 Maccabees, cited in Boyarin, 1999).

The rise of Christianity transformed martyrdom into a central tenet. Texts like *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* (c. 150 CE) depict martyrs as witnesses to faith, enduring persecution under Roman authorities (Rebillard 2020). Scholars argue that martyr narratives were not merely historical accounts but "living texts" crafted to inspire and edify communities (Rebillard 2020, p. 12). Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History* (c. 300 CE) compiled these accounts, shaping Christian identity (de Ste. Croix 2006) by constructing fluid, anonymous narratives.

The Middle Ages saw martyrdom integrated into Christian hagiography. The cult of saints, as explored by Peter Brown (1981), elevated martyrs as intercessors, with relics and shrines fostering pilgrimage (Smith, 2010). The *Passiones* of saints like Perpetua and Felicity were widely circulated, reinforcing

a central ecclesiastical authority (Grig, 2004) while creating important relic markets and fusing political legitimacy and relic possession (Geary, 1978).

The Crusades (11th–13th centuries) introduced a militarized form of martyrdom, where dying in holy war was equated with martyrdom (Riley-Smith, 2008). This shift blurred the lines between passive suffering and active combat that remained important even in the twentieth century.

Scholarship on the matter is vast: Lucy Grig (2004) has highlighted the artistic and textual "making" of martyrs in the post-Constantinian era, while Jonathan Riley-Smith (2008) has examined how crusader martyrdom reflected evolving notions of sacrifice. Peter Brown (1981) has shown how the cult of saints shaped medieval social structures.

The Reformation and Counter-Reformation (16th–17th centuries) saw martyrdom redefined along confessional lines. Protestant martyrs, like Anne Askew, and Catholic martyrs, like the English Carthusians, were celebrated in polemical texts (Gregory, 1999). John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (1563) became a cornerstone of Protestant martyrology (Freeman and Wall, 2001).

Then, martyrdom extended beyond religion, as seen in figures like Joan of Arc, whose death was politicized to legitimize national identity (Castelli, 2004). In Spain, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza's mission to England reflected a blend of religious and political martyrdom (Badagnani, 2014). At the time, martyrdom unified confessional communities (Gregory, 1999), while martyr narratives became entwined with national belonging and martyr narratives became mnemonic devices (Castelli, 2004).

In contemporary Western contexts, martyrdom has expanded to include secular forms, such as civil rights activists or victims of political violence. The Columbine massacre (1999), particularly Cassie Bernall's death, was framed as Christian martyrdom, though its historicity is debated (Castelli, 2004). The recent treatment of Charlie Kirk's death also shows this trend[1].

Scholarly perspectives such as Joylon Mitchell (2012), Paul Middleton (2011) and Lacey Baldwith Smith (1999) have examined how media shapes modern martyrdom narratives, how martyrdom remains a tool for community identity, and how martyrdom remains an alluring frame in psychological and cultural terms (Baldwin Smith, 1999).

The idea of martyrdom traditionally evokes images of religious figures sacrificing their lives for faith. However, in the context of Latin America, a

[1] On September 10, 2025 the U.S. right-wing activist was assassinated while addressing an audience on the campus of Utah Valley University. His death galvanized the already polarized US society.

region marked by profound social, political, and economic upheavals, the notion of *secular martyrs* has emerged as a powerful framework to describe individuals who died for causes rooted in social justice, human rights, and resistance against oppressive regimes or systemic violence, without necessarily being driven by religious convictions. These secular martyrs, often activists, journalists, environmental defenders, and community leaders, have given their lives for ideals such as equality, democracy, and the protection of marginalized communities. This report explores the phenomenon of secular martyrdom in Latin America, examining its historical roots, key figures, socio-political contexts, and enduring impact on the region's struggles for justice.

The term "secular martyr" is not without complexity. Unlike religious martyrs, whose deaths are often tied to spiritual convictions and recognized by religious institutions, secular martyrs are defined by their commitment to humanistic or societal ideals. Their sacrifices are often acknowledged posthumously by communities, movements, or governments, though not always formally. In Latin America, where state violence, authoritarian regimes, and criminal organizations have historically targeted those who challenge the status quo, secular martyrs represent a diverse group whose legacies continue to inspire resistance and reform.

Latin America's history is marked by cycles of colonialism, independence struggles, dictatorships, and democratic transitions, each contributing to the emergence of secular martyrs. The twentieth century was a period of intense political turmoil, with military dictatorships, civil wars, and insurgencies shaping the region's socio-political landscape. From the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) to the Central American civil wars of the 1970s and 1980s, and the dictatorships in South American countries, individuals who challenged systemic inequalities or authoritarian rule often faced violent repression, forced disappearance, torture, and death.

The rise of secular martyrdom can be traced to the region's struggle against colonialism and its aftermath. In the nineteenth century, figures like Simon Bolivar and Jose Marti, while not always martyrs in the traditional sense, laid the groundwork for revolutionary ideals that prioritized national sovereignty and social justice over personal survival. By the twentieth century, the focus shifted toward combating internal oppression, with movements for land reform, workers' rights, and indigenous rights gaining momentum. The Cold War era intensified these struggles, as Latin American governments, often backed by the United States, cracked down on perceived leftist or communist threats, targeting activists and intellectuals.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of liberation theology, a movement within the Catholic Church that aligned with social justice causes. While many religious figures, such as Archbishop Oscar Romero, became martyrs for their

faith-based activism, secular counterparts emerged alongside them, driven by ideologies rooted in Marxism, socialism, or humanism. These individuals faced similar risks, as governments and paramilitary groups labeled them as subversives. The rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s, coupled with the expansion of organized crime and environmental exploitation, further expanded the scope of secular martyrdom, as activists confronted new forms of violence tied to globalization and resource extraction.

The phenomenon of secular martyrdom in Latin America is deeply intertwined with the region's socio-political dynamics. Several key factors contribute to the targeting of activists and the emergence of secular martyrs:

a. **State and Paramilitary Violence.** Throughout the twentieth century, Latin American governments, often under military rule, used violence to suppress dissent. During the Cold War, regimes in countries like Argentina, Chile, Brazil and El Salvador labeled activists as communists, justifying their persecution. The "Dirty Wars" of the 1970s and 1980s saw thousands of activists disappeared, tortured, or killed. For example, Argentina's military junta (1976–1983) targeted intellectuals, students, and unionists, many of whom are regarded as secular martyrs for democracy and human rights. Paramilitary groups and death squads, often supported by governments or elites, have also played a significant role. In El Salvador, the 1989 massacre of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter by the Atlacatl Battalion illustrates the overlap between religious and secular martyrdom, as the priests were targeted for their advocacy of a negotiated peace settlement during the civil war.

b. **Organized Crime and Resource Extraction.** In the twenty-first century, organized crime, particularly drug cartels and mining companies, has become a primary threat to activists. Mexico, identified as the most dangerous country for Catholic priests due to cartel violence, also endangers secular activists who challenge criminal enterprises. The Catholic Multimedia Center reported 800 incidents of extortion and threats against priests between 2021 and 2022, reflecting the broader climate of violence affecting activists. Environmental defenders like Berta Caceres face similar risks from corporations and their private security forces, often backed by corrupt officials.

c. **Global Influences.** The global context, including U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War, has shaped the conditions for secular martyrdom. U.S. support for anti-communist regimes in Latin America, such as El Salvador's military government, fueled violence against activists. The Atlacatl Battalion, responsible for the 1989 Jesuit

killings mentioned above, was trained at the U.S. Army's School of the Americas. Today, multinational corporations and global demand for resources like timber, minerals, and agricultural products drive violence against environmental defenders, as seen in the cases of Chico Mendes and Juan Antonio Lopez.

The phenomenon of secular martyrdom remains highly relevant in Latin America, where activists continue to face deadly risks. According to Global Witness, Latin America accounted for 68% of the 196 environmental defenders killed worldwide in 2022, with Colombia, Brazil, and Mexico among the deadliest countries. The assassination of Juan Antonio Lopez in Honduras (2024) highlights the ongoing threat to environmental and human rights defenders.

Latin American martyrdom often intertwines religious and political dimensions, rooted in the region's history of colonialism, liberation theology, and social justice movements. The *Cristero War* (1926–1929) in Mexico produced martyrs like Miguel Pro, whose death was sanitized by the Church to emphasize asceticism over militancy (Lopez Menendez, 2016).

Later, examples such as Oscar Romero (El Salvador, 1980) abound: Archbishop Romero's assassination while celebrating Mass became a symbol of resistance against oppression. His canonization in 2018 reflects ongoing veneration (Peterson, 2018). Others, like Chico Mendes (Brazil, 1988), show the blending of social justice with environmentalism (Bargdill, 2021).

Many other cases from Argentina, El Salvador, Brazil, Mexico and Chile illustrate secular martyrdom tied to political struggle (Badagnani, 2014) and social upheaval.

Martyrdom thus evolves from a social practice in antiquity to a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing political, social, and ecological dimensions. In Latin America, martyrdom reflects unique regional dynamics, blending Catholic traditions with revolutionary ideals. The continuity of martyrdom as a tool for collective identity persists across eras.

Martyrdom remains a dynamic concept, adapting to cultural and historical contexts. From the Greco-Roman ideals of sacrifice to the politicized deaths of Latin American activists, martyrdom continues to shape identities and inspire resistance. Future scholarship should explore digital media's role in modern martyrological narratives.

Contemporary martyrdom has been a subject of academic inquiry for the better part of the twenty-first century. The international quarterly Social Research released in 2008 the volume "Martyrdom, self-sacrifice and self-denial," an issue exploring its complexities in secularized contexts. From then onwards, scholars across disciplinary and geographical boundaries have

continued to explore the topic both in the Christian tradition and in Islamic contexts, in which case extremism remains at the core.

Latin America's historical specificity has proven to be a fruitful terrain to study Western martyrdom. Contemporary social movements are plagued by martyr narratives. These figures occupy a preponderant place in the history that supports both the consolidation of national states and the forms of social mobilization and resistance to authoritarian regimes. Latin America in particular reveals itself as a territory where the martyrdom phenomenon can be located and studied by resorting to the notion of "political technologies of memory," artifacts that allow forms of institutionalization of the memory of lived atrocities, which are incorporated into the public expectation as demands for recognition and in the political arena as claims for justice.

Martyrdom, a phenomenon of Judeo-Christian origin, represents one of the most important "migrations of the sacred" (Cavanaugh, 2011) that sustain the modern institutional framework.

The chapters that follow explore several cases where the construction of martyrdom narratives became a symbolic device that allowed public uses of memory in the mobilization for specific social and political demands. Some of them also include the analysis of the transformations in devotional Catholicism due to the geopolitical changes derived from the world wars, the socialist revolutions and the leftist movements characteristic of the twentieth century, to explain martyrdom as a socio-political device in a journey that implies its increasing use as a symbol in the mobilization for specific social and political demands, stressing some of them while silencing others.

The opening chapter presents martyrdom as a narrative pattern and shows the differences between martyrs, heroes, and victims to define martyrdom. The chapter discusses the emergence of martyrs and some of the ways in which martyrial narratives and martyrs' lives are to be studied to gain sociological insight into their times.

Fortunato Mallimaci presents a chapter on the relative deregulation of the religious sphere in Latin America since the end of the Catholic monopoly in the relationship with the state and society. In this field, Mallimaci warns, there are affinities and aversions, theodicies and sociodicies as well as wars. The chapter shows how the historical linkages among religion, politics and society in the region have broadened and become more complex.

Oscar Castro's chapter discusses the role that martyrdom plays in the regional expressions of global capitalism. In his take, it simultaneously weaves subjectivities related to the justification of inequalities and inequities, and those related to social cohesion, the transformative agency of those who suffer them and the ideals of "another world is possible" that recover the indigenous

worldviews of care for Mother Earth and respect for the processes of nature of which human beings are a part.

Some of the chapters here are more attuned to analyzing institutional Catholic trends regarding martyrdom. In this fashion, Carpio and Moreno show how, in recent decades, the Catholic Church has significantly increased the number of beatifications and canonizations. Within these processes, the figure of the martyr as the ideal model of a Catholic stands out, emphasized in Vatican discourse. During the twentieth century, Mexico and Spain experienced forms of religious persecution that led to the martyrdom of some Catholic faithful. However, despite their apparent similarities, these processes have fundamental differences that help us understand part of the Church's direction in beatification and canonization procedures during recent papacies.

Following some of these tenets, Julia Young's contribution inquires into how and why veneration of the (Mexico) Cristero martyrs has grown in the United States among U.S. Catholics, including many Catholics with no ancestral or familial ties to Mexico. The chapter describes the roots of cross-border martyr veneration in the early twentieth century and discusses how the Cristero conflict remains salient in Mexico and the United States even now. Young traces devotions both in U.S. parishes and in Catholic popular and online cultures.

Other chapters dwell on the highly contextual character of martyrial narratives. Kristina Boylan and Gregory Swedberg's "When the Sex of the Martyr Matters: Leonor Sanchez, Worker Culture, Catholic Activism, and State Responses in Orizaba, Veracruz, Mexico, 1937" notes that "Defining what a martyr is and who is a canonically-accepted one, much like defining sainthood and saints, is more unstable than assumptions about Roman Catholic solidification of universal definitions and its Canon in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries typically allow" Rather, Sanchez's cause can lead us to ask, along with Paul Middleton, not only whether she merits destination as a martyr or saint, but "who makes martyrdom and for what purpose" with the answer revealing much about 1930s Mexico and contemporary historiography as well as hagiography. This chapter demonstrates that the dominant narrative was not always firmly grounded in documented fact, and that newer iterations are not always an improvement; nonetheless, much can be learned by students of gender, labor, and religion.

Andrew Murphy's chapter explores the politics of martyrdom in two parallel, but completely different cases mentioned above: Oscar Romero, Roman Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador, assassinated in 1980; and Francisco Mendes Filho (better known as Chico Mendes), the Brazilian environmental activist who met the same fate eight years later. Using a framework that traces the process of martyrdom through three phases—death, consecration, and

commemoration—the author shows how popular and institutional factors shape martyrdom in both ecclesiastical and non-ecclesiastical settings.

In the same vein, Paula Tesche's chapter on Marcia Miranda examines the linkages between memorialization and violent death, gender, and the social construction of martyrial narratives in secular contexts. Moreover, the authors trace how politicized memories erode or solidify depending on highly specific contexts. Here, Miranda's death is representative of many others. It embodies the victims of sexual torture during the Chilean dictatorship, those cases that remain anonymous, reduced to a mere number in the hands of justice.

Carmen Moreno's chapter is based on ethnographic research that shows how the devotional narratives produced in Jerico, Colombia, converge and rely on historical facts to legitimize a very particular identity, merging the civic and the religious to reaffirm and differentiate themselves from others. In this exercise, a figure drawn from Colombian history —the good citizen—is reinterpreted and anchored in a local context. Therefore, the figure of Saint Laura Montoya is part of the processes of constructing both localized identities and national models of sainthood and citizenship.

Boris Hau tells the story of five unacknowledged priests who died during the Pinochet era for their commitment to poor working-class communities and are only memorialized by popular expressions, but have met with Church forgetfulness and silence.

In the same fashion, Yves Solis and Eduardo Quadros' research aims at analyzing how the death of migrants in vulnerable situations represents a new type of secularized martyrdom. In recent years, journalists and academics have linked the deaths of victims of forced migration (even when they do not make it explicit), especially women and children, to martyrdom. Their analyses portray the risks and dangers they experience as a structural form of economic, cultural, or systemic martyrdom often endorsed by Catholic authorities.

My deepest thanks to Luis Fernando Contreras and Daniela Fajardo, whose sharp eye made this book immeasurably better.

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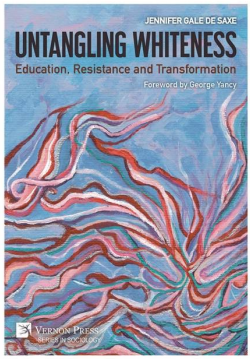

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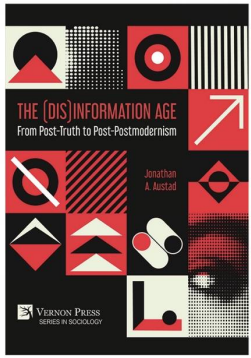

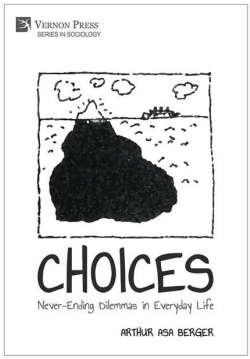

CHOICES

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