

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 72: Martyrdom

The VSI Podcast Intro 00:07

Welcome back to The Very Short Introductions Podcast. From public health to Buddhist ethics, soft matters to classics, and art history to globalization, we'll showcase a concise and original introduction to a wide range of subjects, for wherever your curiosity may take you. So here is today's very short introduction.

Jolyon Mitchell 00:26

Hello, my name is Jolyon Mitchell. I'm a professor at the University of Edinburgh, where I specialize in religion, violence, and peacebuilding, with particular reference to the role of the media and arts in both inciting violence and promoting peace. I'll soon be taking on a new role, which is principal of St. John's College at Durham University, where I'll also be teaching as a professor in the Department of Religion and Theology. Before I worked at the University of Edinburgh, I worked at BBC World Service as a journalist and as a producer, so I covered some of the stories that drew me into questions about martyrdom. And that's one of the research areas that I've been working on and led to this book on *Martyrdom: A Very Short Introduction*, published by Oxford University Press.

Jolyon Mitchell 01:16

Now, as a journalist and producer, I found myself covering stories such as the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, suicide bombers there who described themselves as martyrs, or suicide bombers in the Middle East, who again described themselves as martyrs. Now, for some people within those communities, they were martyrs, but for others, they were murderers or terrorists. So that began to raise questions in my mind about this whole idea of martyrdom. So what I'd like to do in this short presentation around martyrdom is consider different aspects of the theme of martyrdom. It's defined in a dictionary as "a martyr is a person who is killed because of their religious or other beliefs." But, of course, one person's martyrdom is another person's terrorist operation.

Jolyon Mitchell 02:07

So the first aspect I'd like to look at is debates around martyrdom. And this is something that's really I've been wrestling with for some time is thinking about one of the kinds of questions that are raised around martyrdom? Here are a few examples. Why are some deaths described as martyrdoms? And what are different kinds of martyrdoms? And who

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 72: Martyrdom

creates a martyrdom? And why are some people drawn towards martyrdom? And then, also, what's the role of religion and belief in martyrdom? And why are some martyrs and martyrdoms remembered, while others are forgotten? It was the former Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, who was killed herself by her own bodyguards in 1984. She said that martyrdom does not end something, it's only a beginning.

Jolyon Mitchell 02:56

So let's think in a bit more detail about some of these debates about martyrdom, and in relation to those particular questions. Because, of course, it's possible for some people to say, "Well, they were just doing this to kill people." So in other words, it's a form of predatory martyrdoms. In other words, the aim is to make a political or religious point through killing not themselves, but a number of people around them. That may be through a suicide bomb, or through taking a plane into a skyscraper, or other ways of killing themselves, but also trying to involve themselves in a political conflict. Sometimes, it's a form of asymmetrical warfare; often people involved in martyrdoms are those who actually haven't got a lot of power. So the most powerful thing they can do is offer their lives.

Jolyon Mitchell 03:44

So those debates, those questions, led me into thinking about other kinds of questions about martyrdom, for example, how martyrdom is portrayed. Now, this, something I'd looked at in some detail, of different, visual representations of martyrdom. We could, for example, look at a picture of the death of Socrates. It's a famous picture on an oil canvas painted by a French painter called Jacques Louis David in 1787. And it's based on the ancient account of Plato's account in *Phaedo*, which is, of course, describing how he chose to drink hemlock and die a noble death. Some people say this isn't a martyrdom; other people say, no, it is a martyrdom, because he chose to die for his beliefs, particularly for the belief in democracy. So that picture has, at its center, Socrates looking very still, very stern and pointing his finger towards heaven.

Jolyon Mitchell 04:40

Now there are lots of other pictures we could look [at] martyrdoms because artists were drawn towards these violent deaths. So you might, for example, look at a picture of a

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 72: Martyrdom

Maccabean martyr, the martyrdom of Eliza the Scribe by a 19th century artist called Gustave Doré, and you'll see him being killed in the temple for his refusal to eat pork. Or, for example, another portrayal of Christian martyrs from the 19th century by Jean-Léon Gérôme, where you have Christians in a prayer huddle in an arena with a lion just moving towards them to eat them up. Again, these portrayals represent not just historical imaginaries, ways of imagining the past, they also reflect the concerns and interests of the 19th century. You can see in some of these pictures. So, the point here is that martyrdoms were portrayed in lots of different ways. And it could be a mirror, not just to when the original martyrdom was, which might have been 2000 years ago, but also to the time in which the artist portrays them. So that's some points about debates and martyrdom and how martyrdom is portrayed.

Jolyon Mitchell 05:44

But also, it's worth thinking about how martyrdom is remembered. And it's not just remembered visually, but also in texts. In the early Christian church, often, the story of Saint Stephen is seen as the founding martyrdom. He was someone who was stoned for his belief in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Now, the early church is often seen as an example where many believers were put to death by the Roman authorities for their beliefs, because their beliefs were seen as a threat towards Roman power and Roman religion. Some scholars talk about it as like a media asset, that it was used to show the validity of the early Christian beliefs and church. Again, other people would say, that's very problematic because someone dies, it doesn't prove the validity of their beliefs. Nevertheless, it does demonstrate the seriousness with which the individual believes. For example, for Perpetua, a young mum of, in her 20s, still suckling her, her baby, would go to the death in the, the stadium because of her beliefs, much against the wishes of her father.

Jolyon Mitchell 06:59

There are many other examples of the spectacle of martyrdom, which some historians claim have put a question mark over the historical power of the Roman Empire, because it pointed to the fact that these martyrdoms, these individuals who were prepared to die for their beliefs, really believed things which were very subversive to the imperial power of Rome. There's much more we could say about early Christian martyrdoms; for example,

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 72: Martyrdom

how many really were there. But nevertheless, it's worth perhaps moving on from talking about remembering martyrdom to contests about martyrdom. Now, we've already touched on that at the beginning when I was thinking about debates around martyrdom, but martyrdom is a very contested topic. It's one of the reasons why I think it's worth looking at in some detail, because it's, it's significant for today, but it's also significant historically, when you look back at different conflicts.

Jolyon Mitchell 07:51

For example, if you were to look at the conflict, the Iran-Iraq War, where something like a million people were killed between 1980 to 1988, you'll see there that a number of youngsters were celebrated by the regime of Ayatollah Khomeini as martyrs. For example, a young boy called Hossein Fahmideh, who put grenades around his waist and blew himself up, but also blew up a number of Iraqi tanks; now his story was used in a reading literature textbook in the 1990s. It was also celebrated in posters and murals and in cemeteries. Many of the youngsters who were killed in the Iran-Iraq War, particularly [on the] Iranian side, was celebrated as "shaheeds," as martyrs. And if you, if you go around Tehran today, you can see pictures of something like hundreds of thousands of young men who are celebrated as martyrs. In fact, I remember one mother at the cemetery in Tehran, saying, "It was for God's satisfaction," she was sitting by her son's grave, "our enemies were attacking our country." And then she said, "I say this on behalf of all martyrs' mothers, and I'm not angered by the death of my sons." But another mother, also sitting close by, was actually a little bit more suspect in questioning about why was there a necessity for this act take place. So this reads on to questions about the cult of the suicide bomber, which, of course, some people say is something like a toxic evil thing, which leads to people unnecessarily killing themselves and others in predatory acts of martyrdom.

Jolyon Mitchell 09:28

So, so far, we've looked at debates around martyrdom, how martyrdom is portrayed, some of the ways in which it's remembered and used as a media asset, and some of the ways in which martyrdom is contested. But I'd also like to think about martyrdom, how its reformed and how it was particularly relevant to the Reformation in the 16th and 17th century. Now, one of the key books that's worth getting to know is Foxe's Book of Martyrs.

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 72: Martyrdom

This was first published in 1563 and was an extremely popular book that told the story of martyrs from the very beginning of the Church. In fact, it's such a popular book that it was in almost every church in England, and is also in bars as well. So if you open up some of the original 16th century copies, you can see these portrayals of the deaths of people like Ridley or other early reformers dying; they're portrayed in woodcuts, and these sort of gruesome pictures, often they're ones with sort of coffee stains on, beer stains or bits of food on because they were obviously the ones that people enjoyed, most with a sort of sense of voyeurism, to look at. So this book was used to celebrate the martyrs who have built the Reformation church.

Jolyon Mitchell 10:42

Of course, the Counter-Reformation, the Catholic response to the Reformations, the Protestant Reformations, also celebrated a number of different martyrdoms. For example, something like Catherine of Alexandria, early martyrs, again, showing the validity of these deaths. One of the most famous stories that's known from the, the 17th century is the story of a Dutch Reformer called Dirk Willems, a martyrdom, and he was being chased through a very cold Netherlands. He was being chased by a guy who, who suddenly screamed out, fell through the ice. Now Dirk, rather than running away, turned around and pulled out his pursuer. But by turning around and rescuing him, he was able to be captured. And much to the dismay of many people who saw this act of bravery, he was captured, tried, and executed. He is often seen as at the 17th century martyr. There's a famous picture of him standing on the ice, reaching towards the man who's just struggling and trying to avoid drowning in that freezing water. Again, you can see how these stories are retold, but then reused and reformed to celebrate different kinds of theologies and beliefs.

Jolyon Mitchell 11:56

Let's think now for a moment about another aspect of martyrdom: how martyrdom is politicized. It's politicized in a number of different places. For example, you can see it in Russia. Even today, it's being used for celebrating some of the martyrs who've been killed in Russia-Ukraine War, but also, for example, in telling the story of the murder of the Tsar, and you can see how that's now turned into a Orthodox icons; He's seen as a protomartyr, someone who maybe didn't die of his beliefs, but is now celebrated as a kind of martyr.

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 72: Martyrdom

Another example of a death that's turned into a political martyrdom, perhaps most famously, and a religious one, is of Charles I. Charles I's execution was, quite swiftly after 1648, was celebrated as a martyrdom. He was seen very much as following in the footsteps of Jesus, and this allowed those who were in favor of, or supporting, his cause, the Royalist cause, to celebrate it, and as someone who laid down his life for his people. And so this allowed many people after the death of Oliver Cromwell to celebrate and to commend the return of his son Charles II because there was memory of the father, who, even though it was the subject of a regicide had given his life up for his country, and so maybe we should bring back the king and not stay with the Protectorate.

Jolyon Mitchell 13:24

So that's a couple of examples, one from England, one from Russia. But you could take a couple more other quick examples. One, for example, Emily Wilding Davison, she was the suffragette who stood in front of the King's horse, and was killed trying to make the case for women to get votes. There, you can, the famous cover *The Suffragette*, which is a magazine produced by the suffragette movement, and you'll see Emily Davison and a picture of her. She's got angelic wings, hands raised to the sky, and she's standing there; clearly, she's a martyr, a founding martyr for the suffragette movement.

Jolyon Mitchell 14:00

Another famous political martyr, we could go to the Philippines and learn about José Rizal. José Rizal's story, he was executed by the Spanish rulers, and in many ways, he was a founding martyr. If you go to the Philippines, he's not so well known in Britain, but if you go to the Philippines, everyone knows about José Rizal, and he's seen as someone who is, by his death, founder of the modern Philippines. It's striking to notice how his story is repeated and retold again and again, through pictures, through films, through dramas, through light shows, and how it's amplified and made louder and louder, and how it's elaborated upon, and then how it reverberates as a story. So you can see these martyrdoms is almost like stones that drop into a pond and then they go rippling out and affect the whole way in which people think, not just about the death then, maybe dozens of years ago, hundreds of years ago, but also now; they change the way in which we think about now.

Jolyon Mitchell 14:56

So, finally, I'd like to think about how martyrdom is questioned. This takes us back to the beginning, where we thought about questions. You can see this, how it's questioned, for example, in the martyrdom of Thomas Beckett, who was killed, you'll remember, in Canterbury Cathedral, the archbishop killed by knights, and within a few weeks, his story was all over Europe. And it turned Canterbury Cathedral into a destination as a site of pilgrimage; it drew thousands, tens of thousands of people there to pray. And, in fact, many people say, because of his martyrdom, the city of Canterbury became bigger and bigger. Indeed, the cathedral became bigger and bigger to house all the pilgrims who visited. Of course, now we remember it, perhaps not just through the famous stories, but also through films with people like Richard Burton portraying Thomas à Beckett. But this, again, shows this is a very different kind of martyrdom, someone dying for their beliefs, as opposed to beliefs passively, non-actively, non-predatorily, as opposed to someone that who is described as a suicide bomber.

Jolyon Mitchell 15:58

Now, there are many other examples we'd use, and there are, isn't really time to go into them. But, nevertheless, it's worth just noting, as we come to a conclusion, to think about someone like Joan of Arc, how significant she is in the French story, history, how very much she is a martyr and how she's portrayed in films later.

Jolyon Mitchell 16:16

Perhaps as a way of finishing, I could invite you to come with me to stand beneath one of the big doors at Westminster Abbey in London and look up, and you will see there something like ten modern, 20th century martyrs, and they include a number of different famous figures from people like Martin Luther King, to Oscar Romero, or to a Russian Princess, or to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to a number of different figures who gave their lives for their beliefs. Each had their own particular story. And in many ways, it's important to tread cautiously and carefully because these are acts of danger, of courage, at times of real heartbreak. Oscar Romero was an archbishop in, in San Salvador, and he wrote a few weeks before his death, "It's very easy to kill, especially when one has weapons. But how hard it is to let oneself be killed for the love of the people." He is celebrated as a martyr who did die for the love of the people because he stood up against the powers that be,

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 72: Martyrdom

particularly against the political powers. And so he's celebrated as a very different kind of martyr from some of the martyrs that I began discussing at the beginning.

Jolyon Mitchell 17:35

Well, thank you very much for listening this far. I hope you can see why this is such a rich and important topic. It's important both for the past, for understanding the past. It's important for the present, for understanding what's happening in, in the Middle East, in different parts of the world where people are prepared to be martyrs. And it's also important for the future as well, to help us think about why, perhaps, certain forms of martyrdom should be challenged and should be educated against. So I hope you'll join me in reading more around this topic, which, as I say, raises lots of questions about life, death, and belief in the 21st century.

The VSI Podcast Outro 18:14

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