✣ CHAPTER 8 ✣

The Martyrs: Sacrifice as Rational Choice

In chapter 1 of *The Martyrs of Palestine*, Eusebius identifies Procopius as the "first of the martyrs." Having been called before the governor, he was ordered to make libations to the four emperors. He refused and was "immediately beheaded." Soon thereafter other bishops of the church in Palestine were seized. They did not merely confront the threat of execution, for the governor was determined to break the Christian movement by using torture to force its leaders to recant. Eusebius reported:

> Some were scourged with innumerable strokes of the lash, others racked in their limbs and galled in their sides with torturing instruments, some with intolerable fetters, by which the joints of their hands were dislocated. Nevertheless they bore the event. (1850 ed.)

In chapter 2, Eusebius tells the story of Romanus, who was seized at Antioch:

> When the judge had informed him that he was to die by flames, with a cheerful countenance and a most ardent mind he received the sentence and was led away. He was then tied to the stake, and when the wood was heaped up about him, and they were kindling the pile, only waiting the word from the expected emperor, he exclaimed, "where then is the fire?" Saying this he was summoned again before the emperor, to be subjected to new tortures, and therefore had his tongue cut out, which he

This chapter draws heavily on the creative new theoretical work of my friend and sometime coauthor Laurence Iannaccone (1992, 1994). The theoretical propositions included in this chapter appeared previously in Stark and Iannaccone 1992 in the portion of that essay for which Iannaccone was primarily responsible.

The total number of Christians martyred by the Romans probably was fewer than a thousand. But their steadfastness greatly strengthened the faith of other Christians and impressed many pagans.

> bore with the greatest of fortitude, as he proved his actions to all, showing also that the power of God is always present to the aid of those who are obliged to bear any hardship for the sake of religion, to lighten their labours, and to strengthen their ardor.

In chapter 8 we learn of the brave Valentina who was seized with other worshipers in Gaza and brought before Maximinus. As the executioners brutally tortured another Christian woman,

> unable to bear the merciless, cruel, and inhuman scene before her, and with courage exceeding all [Greek heros], she exclaimed against the judge from the midst of the crowd, "And how long, then, will you thus cruelly torture my sister?" He [Maximinus], the more bitterly incensed by this, ordered the woman immediately to be seized. She was then dragged into the midst . . . and attempts were first made to bring her over to sacrifice by persuasion. But when she refused she was dragged to the altar by force . . . [W]ith intrepid step, she kicked the altar, and overturned all on it, together with the fire. Upon this, the judge, exasperated, like a savage beast, applied tortures beyond all that he had done before.

To Eusebius, the bravery and steadfastness of the martyrs was proof of Christian virtue. Indeed, many pagans were deeply impressed. Galen, the distinguished Greek physician to Roman emperors, wrote of Christians that "their contempt of death (and of its sequel) is patent to us every day" (quoted in Benko 1984:141). But that is not the way modern social scientists have reacted. In their eyes, such sacrifices are so unthinkable as to be obvious symptoms of psychopathology. Several have attributed the ability of early Christians to endure as rooted in *masochism* (Riddle 1931; Menninger 1938; Reik 1976). That is, we are expected to believe that the martyrs defied their accusers because they loved pain and probably gained sexual pleasure from it.

Thus in his monograph *The Martyrs: A Study in Social Control*, written under the supervision of Shirley Jackson Case at the University of Chicago Divinity School, Donald W. Riddle claimed:

> One of the elements of the morbid desire for martyrdom was the abnormal enjoyment of the pain which it involved. . . . Clearly, the voluntary surrender of one's self to the experience of martyrdom, when it was known that the most exquisite tortures were involved, is *prima facie* evidence of the presence of the tendency towards masochism. (1931:64)

In later passages Riddle discovered unmistakable evidence of masochism whenever Christians were able to endure their tortures with composure or dignity, and diagnosed acute cases of masochism whenever anyone defied the state by voluntary acceptance of martyrdom.

Views such as this are not unusual among social scientists. Rather, from the beginning, social scientific studies of religion have been shaped by a single question: *What makes them do it?* How *could* any rational person make sacrifices on behalf of unseen supernatural entities? The explicit answer to this question nearly always has been that religion is rooted in the *irrational.* Keep in mind that the imputation of irrational religious behavior by social scientists is not limited to extraordinary actions such as martyrdom. Rather, they have been content to apply the irrationalist argument to such ordinary activities as prayer, observance of moral codes, and contributions of time and wealth. For whether it be the imputation of outright psychopathology, of groundless fears, or merely of faulty reasoning and misperceptions, the irrationalist assumption has dominated the field. The notion that normal, sophisticated people could be religious has been limited to a few social scientists willing to allow their own brand of very mild, "intrinsic," religiousness to pass the test of rationality.

Thus, until recently, the social *scientific* study of religion was nothing of the sort. The field was far more concerned with discrediting religion than with understanding it. This is clear when it is realized that *only* in the area of religious belief and behavior have social scientists not based their theories on a rational choice premise. Indeed, my colleagues and I recently showed that antagonism toward all forms of religion and the

conviction that it soon must disappear in an enlightened world were articles of faith among the earliest social scientists, and that today social scientists are far less likely to be religious than are scholars in other areas, especially those in the physical and natural sciences (Stark, Iannaccone, and Finke 1995).

Nevertheless, despite the enormous weight of learned opinion that created and sustained it, the irrationalist approach to religion recently has fallen upon evil times—beset by contrary evidence and by the unanticipated theoretical power of rational choice theories imported from microeconomics and modified appropriately. This chapter represents another step in that direction and extends my efforts to establish a scientific, rather than a polemical and political, basis for studies of religion. In it I shall attempt to show that, when analyzed properly, religious sacrifices and stigmas—even when acute cases are considered—usually turn out to represent rational choices. Indeed, the more that people must sacrifice for their faith, the greater the value of the rewards they gain in return. Put in conventional economic language, in terms of the ratio of costs to benefits, within limits the more expensive the religion, the better bargain it is.

To proceed, I will introduce a series of propositions drawn from rational choice theory (Iannaccone 1992, 1994; Stark and Iannaccone 1992, 1994). When applied to early Christianity, these propositions yield the conclusion that sacrifice and stigma were the dynamo behind the rise of Christianity—the factors that created strong organizations filled with highly committed members ready to do what needed to be done. For the fact is that Christianity was by far the best religious "bargain" around.

Religion and Rationality

Let us begin with a theoretical proposition: *Religion supplies compensators for rewards that are scarce or unavailable.*

A reward is *scarce* if its supply is sufficiently limited that not

everyone (and perhaps not anyone) can have as much of it as they desire. The scarcest of all rewards are those that simply are not available in the here and now. Since these scarcest of rewards are among those most highly valued by most human beings, religions offer alternative means for gaining them: religious compensators are a sort of substitute for desired rewards.

Compensators, as noted in chapter 2, provide an explanation of how the desired reward (or an equivalent alternative) actually can be obtained, but propose a method for attaining the reward that is rather elaborate and lengthy: often the actual attainment will be in the distant future or even in another reality, and the truth of the explanation will be very difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain in advance. When a child asks for a bike and a parent proposes that the child keep his or her room clean for a year and get no grade below B during the same period, whereupon the bike will appear, a compensator has been issued in lieu of the desired reward. We can distinguish compensators from rewards because the latter is the thing wanted, the former a proposal about gaining the reward.

As reward-seeking beings, humans will always prefer the reward to the compensator, but they will often have no choice because some things we want cannot be had in sufficient supply by some people and some rewards cannot be had, here and now, by anyone. Compensators abound in all areas of life, but our interest here is in religious compensators. Let me note only the most obvious instance. Most people desire immortality. No one knows how to achieve that here and now—the Fountain of Youth remains elusive. But many religions offer instructions about how that reward can be achieved over the longer term. When one's behavior is guided by such a set of instructions, one has accepted a compensator. One is also exhibiting religious commitment, since the instructions always entail certain requirements vis-à-vis the divine. Indeed, it is usually necessary to enter into a long-term exchange relationship with the divine and with divinely inspired institutions in order to follow the instructions: effective religious organizations rest upon these underlying exchange relationships.

I want it to be clear that I imply nothing about the truth or falsity of religious compensators. My interest is limited to the process of rational choices by which humans value and exchange these compensators.

Religious compensators are imbued with unique advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, they offer the prospect of huge rewards, rewards that are otherwise not plausibly obtainable from any other source. Only by evoking supernatural powers can religious compensators promise eternal life, reunion with the departed, a perfected soul, or unending bliss. The persistence of death, war, sin, and human misery need not invalidate these promises, since their truth and fulfillment are rooted in another reality. An individual may one day arrive at the conclusion that, in this life, virtue must be its own reward. But no one can know that virtue is not rewarded in the world to come, where the first shall be last and the last shall be first. On the other hand, neither can anyone know that virtue *is* rewarded in the world to come, or indeed whether such a world exists. Hence because these and other religious compensators are beyond the possibility of evaluation, they are inherently risky.

Let us now analyze how humans behave when confronted with risk and choice. The initial proposition is fundamental to the whole of social science: *Individuals choose their actions rationally, including those actions which concern compensators.*

Rational choice involves weighing the anticipated costs and benefits of actions and then seeking to act so as to maximize net benefits.

The assumption of rationality has numerous expressions in the social sciences. Economists speak of utility maximization; exchange theorists postulate that "people are more likely to perform an activity the more valuable they perceive the reward of that activity to be" (Homans 1964). Elsewhere I have proposed that "humans seek to maximize rewards and to minimize costs" (Stark 1992). But there is probably no reason to insist on one expression over another.

Many object to the rational choice proposition on the grounds that it is reductionistic. Assuredly, it is. Reductionism

is the primary scientific task—to explain as much of the world as possible by reference to as little as possible. Moreover, surely it is not more reductionistic to attribute religious behavior to rational choices than to blame it on "false consciousness," "neurosis," or "masochism." Furthermore, the rational actor proposition does not assume that the actor necessarily has, or must obtain, complete information concerning optional actions. Later in this chapter I examine means humans use to seek more complete information about the validity of religious compensators, and how they rate sources as to the most "conclusive" validations. Because it is quite impossible to gain full knowledge about the ultimate fulfillment of many religious compensators, actors must select on the basis of incomplete information. But, as Gary S. Becker explained:

> Incomplete information . . . should not, however, be confused with irrational or volatile behavior. The economic approach has developed a theory of the optimal or rational accumulation of costly information that implies, for example, greater investment in information when undertaking major than minor decisions. . . . The assumption that information is often seriously incomplete because it is costly to acquire is used in the economic approach to explain the same kind of behavior that is explained by irrational and . . . "non rational" behavior in other discussions. (1976:6–7)

That is, it often would be irrational, given the costs, to seek more complete information, and often it would be equally irrational to fail to act for want of more complete information since the costs of being wrong are much less than the costs of better information, and the potential gains from acting far outweigh the costs of acting.

But if humans seek to maximize, why is it that they do not all act alike? Here the preference axiom is vital: *People differ greatly in their relative evaluations of specific rewards or benefits.* Were I to stick closely to formulations from economic theory, I would have worded this to note that people have different "preference

schedules" and therefore some people will evaluate any given reward or benefit more highly than will some other people. There is a considerable literature in the sociology of religion to demonstrate that people have decidedly different tastes in things religious,[1] some of which can be traced to variations in their existential circumstances (Argyle 1958; Glock and Stark 1965; Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 1987; Iannaccone 1988, 1990). At the most general level this proposition clarifies how it is possible for people to engage in exchanges.

I include this proposition here in large part to counter critics who claim that by postulating the rationality of religious behavior, I exclude all behavior that is not selfish or hedonistic, and that I thereby dismiss the power of religion to animate those altruists and ascetics who people the community of saints. This is simply wrong and trivializes the very behavior it ostensibly praises. To say that people differ in terms of their preference schedules is simply an uninspired way of saying that Mother Teresa may well be elevated to sainthood one day, not because she avoids rewards and pursues costs, but because of *what* she finds rewarding. To call Mother Teresa an altruist and thus classify her behavior as nonrational is to deny the finest of human capacities, our ability to love. Thus although rational choice theories restrict behavior to that which is consistent with a person's definitions of rewards, it has very little to say about the actual content of those rewards. This leaves all the room needed for people to be charitable, brave, unselfish, reverent, and even silly.

In combination, the first three propositions claim that individuals will evaluate religious compensators in essentially the same way that they evaluate all other objects of choice. They will evaluate their costs and benefits (including the "opportunity costs" that arise when one action can be undertaken only if others are forgone) and will "consume" those compensators which, together with their other actions, maximize net benefits. In particular, they will weigh the tremendous rewards posited by many religious compensators both against the cost of meeting

the conditions that compensators always entail and against the risk that the posited rewards will not be forthcoming.

However, since people avoid risk just as surely as they seek rewards, compensators present people with classic *approach/avoidance* dilemmas. Individuals must somehow weigh the costs of a compensator against the value of the rewards to be received, allowing for the risk of getting nothing, or at least much less than was promised. However, since no probability of risk can be known directly, individuals must seek other sources of confidence—that is, humans will seek more complete information about the compensators they might select.

The Credibility Problem

But if the value of religious compensators cannot be known with certainty in this world, how *can* humans estimate the risk of investing in them? Five propositions explain how. The first two are these:

The perceived value of a religious compensator is established through social interactions and exchanges.

Individuals perceive a religious compensator as less risky, and hence more valuable, when it is promoted, produced, or consumed collectively.

Here we discover why religion is above all a social phenomenon. Those who attempt to practice a private, purely personal religion lack means for assessing its value. For them to place a high value on religious compensators would at least border on the irrational. Moreover, the religious activities of truly solitary religionists will receive little if any reinforcement and should therefore tend to be extinguished (ascetic religious "hermits" in fact are situated in a supportive social setting). But those who practice a religion within a group have a natural basis for estimating the value of their religious compensators. Such persons will tend to accept a value that is an average of the levels of confidence expressed by those with whom they interact (undoubtedly weighted by his or her confidence in each source). As we shall see shortly, this helps explain high levels of commit-

ment—which can be analyzed as high levels of investment to keep compensators in force—sustained by congregations that are very strict about their confessional requirements of membership. Doubters lower the value assigned to compensators.

Thus religion is almost always a social phenomenon. Or, as an economist would put it, religion is a *collectively produced commodity*. It is obvious enough that many religious activities require group participation—liturgies and testimony meetings, congregational prayers and responsive readings, sermons and songs. But it is no less true that religious faith itself is a social product, collectively produced and maintained. Collective production is no less central to providing safeguards against fraud—a chronic problem of client cults where people obtain religious commodities from self-employed practitioners on a one-to-one basis (Stark and Bainbridge 1985).

Now, let us consider another proposition: *A religion's compensators are perceived as less risky, and hence more valuable, when there is credible evidence that participation in the religion generates tangible benefits that are not readily explained in secular terms.*

Testimonials are a common means of promoting secular products. Within religion, they rank as the primary technique by which religious groups act collectively to generate faith in their compensators. Of course, no testimony suffices to *prove* that a religion's otherworldly promises are true. But testifiers can and usually do convey their personal certainty that such is the case. Moreover, religious testimonials can enumerate the tangible benefits that a testifier attributes to his or her religious commitment. They can recount experiences of personal regeneration that followed conversion or renewal—victory over alcoholism, drug dependency, or marital infidelity. In more dramatic fashion some testifiers can claim to have benefited from miracles—supernatural interventions that averted catastrophe or provided inexplicable healing. In this way people offer evidence that a religion "works" and that its promises must therefore be true.

Testimonials are especially persuasive when they come from a trusted source, such as a personal acquaintance. Here again

we see why successful religions gravitate toward collective production. Fellow members are much more trustworthy than strangers. Testimonials are also more persuasive when the testifiers have relatively little to gain (or better yet, much to lose) from having their claims heard and believed. Friends and fellow congregants have fewer incentives to overstate the benefits of the religion than do clergy, whose livelihood may depend on keeping the flock faithful. Hence: *Religious leaders have greater credibility when they receive low levels of material reward in return for their religious services.*

Put most bluntly, affluent clergy are never a match for lay preachers and impoverished ascetics in head-to-head credibility contests. It is as Walter Map observed, after seeing Waldensian representatives come to Rome in 1179: "They go about two by two, barefoot, clad in woolen garments, owning nothing, holding all things in common like the Apostles . . . [I]f we admit them, we shall be driven out" (quoted in Johnson 1976:251). In short, the powerful ascetic current that persists in all religious traditions is a natural response to the problem of religious risk. Moreover, by the same logic we can conclude: *Martyrs are the most credible exponents of the value of a religion, and this is especially true if there is a voluntary aspect to their martyrdom.*

By voluntarily accepting torture and death rather than defecting, a person sets the highest imaginable value upon a religion and communicates that value to others. Indeed, as will be reported later in this chapter, Christian martyrs typically had the opportunity to display their steadfastness to large numbers of other Christians, and the value of Christianity they thereby communicated often deeply impressed pagan observers as well.

The Free-Rider Problem

Free-rider problems are the Achilles' heel of collective activities. Michael Hechter summarizes the free-rider problem as follows. "Truly rational actors will not join a group to pursue common ends when, without participating, they can reap the

benefit of other people's activity in obtaining them. If every member of the relevant group can share in the benefits . . . then the rational thing is to free ride . . . rather than to help attain the corporate interest" (1987:27). The consequence is, of course, that insufficient collective goods are created because too few contribute. Everyone suffers—but those who give most generously suffer the most. Let me state this as a proposition: *Religion involves collective action, and all collective action is potentially subject to exploitation by free riders.*

One need not look far to find examples of anemic congregations plagued by free-rider problems—a visit to the nearest liberal Protestant church usually will suffice to discover "members" who draw upon the group for weddings, funerals, and (perhaps) holiday celebrations, but who provide little or nothing in return. Even if they do make substantial financial contributions, they weaken the group's ability to create collective religious goods because their inactivity devalues the compensators and reduces the "average" level of commitment.

However, far more striking examples are found in sects and cults. In such groups, which can survive only with high levels of commitment, the costs of free riding are laid bare. Consider, for example, the Shakers' problems with transient members. These so-called winter Shakers would join Shaker communities in the late fall, obtain food and shelter throughout the winter, and then leave when employment opportunities had improved (Bainbridge 1982).

During the time Lofland and I observed them (see chapter 1), the Moonies encountered similar difficulties with "exploiters" whose motives for joining conflicted with or undermined the goals of the movement. Some merely "attempted to extract some nonreligious benefit from the [Moonies], such as inexpensive room and board, money, . . . or sex" (Lofland 1977:152). Others actually attempted to use participation in the group as a base from which to recruit customers for their own, competing, spiritualist churches.

Free riding was by no means unique to the Shakers and Moonies. Most of the nineteenth-century communes studied by

Hine (1983) and Kanter (1972) were afflicted with "commitment problems." This perverse dynamic threatens all groups engaged in the production of collective goods, and it pertains to social and psychic benefits such as enthusiasm and solidarity no less than to material resources. It would seem that religions are caught on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, a congregational structure that relies on the collective action of numerous volunteers is needed to make the religion credible. On the other hand, that same congregational structure threatens to undermine the level of commitment and contributions needed to make a religious group effective. However, costly demands offer a solution.

Sacrifice and Stigma

The costly demands in question are not simply monetary costs analogous to the purchase price of secular goods. They are instead what at first glance would seem to be gratuitous costs, the *stigmas* and *sacrifices* common to sects, cults, and other "deviant" religious groups. Religious *stigmas* consist of all aspects of social deviance that attach to membership in the group. A group may prohibit some activities deemed normal in the external society (drinking, for example), or it may require other activities deemed abnormal by the world (shaving one's head, for example). By meeting these demands, members deviate from the norms of the surrounding society. *Sacrifices* consist of investments (material and human) and forgone opportunities required of those who would gain and retain membership in the group. Clearly, stigma and sacrifice often go hand in hand, as when the stigma of highly unusual dress prevents normal career development.

Stated in terms more familiar to sociologists of religion, sacrifices and stigmas both generate and reflect the "tension" between the religious group and the rest of society (Johnson 1963; Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 1987; Iannaccone 1988).

They distinguish mainstream "churches" from deviant "sects" or "cults."

At first glance it would seem that costly demands must always make a religion less attractive. And indeed, the economists' law of demand predicts just that, *other things remaining equal.* But it turns out that other things do not remain equal when religions impose these kinds of costs on their members. To the contrary, costly demands strengthen a religious group by mitigating "free-rider" problems that otherwise lead to low levels of member commitment and participation: *Sacrifice and stigma mitigate the free-rider problems faced by religious groups.*

They do so for two reasons. First, they create a barrier to group entry. No longer is it possible merely to drop in and reap the benefits of membership. To take part at all, you must qualify by accepting the stigmas and sacrifices demanded from everyone. Thus high costs tend to *screen out* free riders—those potential members whose commitment and participation would otherwise be low. The costs act as nonrefundable registration fees that, as in secular markets, measure seriousness of interest in the product. Only those willing to pay the price qualify.

Second, high costs tend to *increase* participation among those who do join. Group members find that the temptation to free ride is weaker, not because their human nature has somehow been transformed, but rather because the opportunities to free ride have been reduced and (in equilibrium) the payoff to involvement has been substantially increased. If we may not attend dances or movies, play cards, go to taverns, or join fraternal organizations, we will eagerly await the Friday church social.

The dynamics of stigma and sacrifice have the following direct and formal consequences (Iannaccone 1992). First: *By demanding higher levels of stigma and sacrifice, religious groups induce higher average levels of member commitment and participation.* Second: *By demanding higher levels of stigma and sacrifice, religious groups are able to generate greater material, social, and religious benefits for their members.*

At first glance it seems paradoxical that when the cost of

membership increases, the net gains of membership increase too. But this is necessarily the case with collectively produced goods. Some examples may be helpful. The individual's positive experience of a worship service increases to the degree that the church is full, the members participate enthusiastically (everyone joins in the songs and prayers), and others express very positive evaluations of what is taking place. Thus as each member *pays* the costs of membership, each *gains* from higher levels of production of collective goods.

Furthermore, for a religious group, as with any organization, *commitment is energy*. That is, when commitment levels are high, groups can undertake all manner of collective actions, and these are in no way limited to the psychic realm. For example, because Mormons are asked to contribute not only 10 percent of their incomes, but also 10 percent of their time to the church, they are thereby enabled to lavish social services upon one another—many of the rewards for being a Mormon are entirely tangible.

These propositions lead to a critical insight, perhaps *the* critical insight: Membership in an expensive religion is, for many people, a "good bargain."[2] Conventional cost-benefit analysis alone suffices to explain the continued attraction of religions that impose sacrifices and stigmas upon their members. This conclusion is, of course, in extreme contrast with the conventional social science view that to pay high religious costs can only reflect irrationality, or at least woeful ignorance. However, more sophisticated analysis reveals that members of strict religious organizations have substantial reason to believe that their information about compensators is sufficient and thus their behavior fulfills the rational choice proposition. This suggests why the recent introduction of rational choice theories into the social scientific study of religion has been recognized as a major shift in paradigms (Warner 1993)—the irrationalist position is in full retreat.

Against this theoretical background, I should like to reexamine early Christianity. How much did it cost to be a Christian? Is it plausible that these costs strengthened the commitment of

the group? Was Christian commitment translated into this-worldly rewards to the faithful? In short, was Christianity a "good deal?"

Christian Sacrifices

Christians were expected to do much for their faith. A substantial list of "do nots" departed from pagan norms and practices, many of which have been discussed in chapter 5. But equally costly were the things Christian were expected to do, and, it was hoped, to do gladly—care for the sick, infirm, and dependent, for example. Later in this chapter we will see how these sacrifices typically came back as rewards. But there is no need here to expand the list of what might be called the many smaller sacrifices of Christian membership. Rather, now it is time to confront the most difficult possible task for any attempt to apply rational choice theory to religion.

Ultimate Sacrifices

Perhaps rational people are willing to give money and time to social service and observe strict norms governing sex and marriage because of religion. But how could a rational person accept grotesque torture and death in exchange for risky, intangible religious rewards?

First of all, many early Christians probably could not have done so, and some are known have recanted when the situation arose. Eusebius reported that when the first group of bishops was seized, "some indeed, from excessive dread, broken down and overpowered by their terrors, sunk and gave way immediately at the first onset" (*The Martyrs of Palestine* 1, 1850 ed.).

Second, persecutions rarely occurred, and only a tiny number of Christians ever were martyred—only "hundreds, not thousands" according to W.H.C. Frend (1965:413). Indeed, commenting on Tacitus's claim that Nero had murdered "an

immense multitude" of Christians, Marta Sordi wrote that "a few hundred victims would justify the use of this term, given the horror of what happened" (1986:31). The truth is that the Roman government seems to have cared very little about the "Christian menace." There was surprisingly little effort to persecute Christians, and when a wave of persecution did occur, usually only bishops and other prominent figures were singled out. Thus for rank-and-file Christians the threat of persecution was so slight as to have counted for little among the potential sacrifices imposed on them.

But even if their numbers were few, some Christians went unhesitatingly to terrible deaths rather than recant. How could this have been the rational choice? In most of the reported instances the ability to face martyrdom was an extraordinary instance of the collective creation of commitment as a result of which prominent members built up an immense stake in martyrdom.

Martyrdom not only occurred in public, often before a large audience, but it was often the culmination of a long period of preparation during which those faced with martyrdom were the object of intense, face-to-face adulation. Consider the case of Ignatius of Antioch. Sometime late in the first century, Ignatius became bishop of Antioch. During the reign of the emperor Trajan (98–117)—the precise year is unknown—Ignatius was condemned to death as a Christian. But instead of being executed in Antioch, he was sent off to Rome in the custody of ten Roman soldiers. Thus began a long, leisurely journey during which local Christians came out to meet him all along the route, which passed through many of the more important sites of early Christianity in Asia Minor on its way to the West. At each stop Ignatius was allowed to preach to and meet with those who gathered, none of whom was in any apparent danger although their Christian identity was obvious. Moreover, his guards allowed Ignatius to write letters to many Christian congregations in cities bypassed along the way, such as Ephesus and Philadelphia. Ignatius's surviving seven letters have been

much studied for their theological and historical content (Schoedel 1985; Grant 1966). What is important here, however, is what they tell us about the spiritual and psychological preparation for martyrdom.

Here was a man who truly believed that he had an appointment with immortality in *this world* as well as the next. Robert Grant has remarked upon the "regal-imperial style" of the letters and how they convey that the author was engaged in a triumphal journey (1966:90). Or, as William Schoedel remarked,

> It is no doubt as a conquering hero that Ignatius thinks of himself as he looks back on part of his journey and says that the churches who received him dealt with him not as a "transient traveller," noting that "even churches that do not lie on my way according to the flesh went before me city by city." (1991:135)

What Ignatius feared was not death in the arena, but that well-meaning Christians might gain him a pardon. Thus he wrote ahead to his fellow Christians in Rome adjuring that they in no way interfere to prevent his martyrdom:

> The truth is, I am afraid it is your love that will do me wrong. For you, of course, it is easy to achieve your object; but for me it is difficult to win my way to God, should you be wanting in consideration of me. . . . Grant me no more than that you let my blood be spilled in sacrifice to God. . . .
>
> I am writing to all the Churches and state emphatically to all that I die willingly for God, provided you do not interfere. I beg you, do not show me unseasonable kindness. Suffer me to be the food of wild beasts, which are the means of making my way to God. God's wheat I am, and by the teeth of wild beasts I am to be ground that I may prove Christ's pure bread. (*Epistle to the Romans*, 1946 ed.)

Ignatius was reaching for glory, both here and beyond. He expected to be remembered through the ages and compares himself to martyrs gone before him, including Paul, "in whose footsteps I wish to be found when I come to meet God."

We thus encounter what is known as the cult of the saints, most of whom were martyrs (Droge and Tabor 1992; Brown 1981). It soon was clear to all Christians that extraordinary fame and honor attached to martyrdom. Nothing illustrates this better than the description of the martyrdom of Polycarp, contained in a letter sent by the church in Smyrna to the church in Philomelium (collected in Fremantle 1953:185–192). Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna who was burned alive in about 156. After the execution his bones were retrieved by some of his followers—an act witnessed by Roman officials, who took no action against them. The letter spoke of "his sacred flesh" and described his bones as "being of more value than precious stones and more esteemed than gold." The letter-writer reported that the Christians in Smyrna would gather at the burial place of Polycarp's bones every year "to celebrate with great gladness and joy the birthday of his martyrdom." The letter concluded, "The blessed Polycarp . . . to whom be glory, honour, majesty, and a throne eternal, from generation to generation. Amen." It also included the instruction: "On receiving this, send on the letter to the more distant brethren that they may glorify the Lord who makes choice of his own servants."

In fact, today we actually know the names of nearly all of the Christian martyrs because their contemporaries took pains that they should be remembered for their very great holiness. Indeed, as Peter Brown pointed out, the sufferings of the martyrs "were miracles in themselves" (1981:79). Brown quoted the *Decretrum Gelasianum*:

> We must include also [for public reading] the deeds of the saints in which triumph blazed forth through the many forms of torture that they underwent and their marvelous confession of faith. For what Catholic can doubt that they suffered more than is possible for human beings to bear, and did not endure this by their own strength, but by the grace and help of God?

Moreover, martyrdom did not merely earn rewards in the world to come, while promising only posthumous honor in this world. Instead, martyrs were often very highly rewarded prior to

their final ordeal. For example, just as Christians flocked to meet and to venerate Ignatius on his journey, so too did they flock to prisons to adore and shower food and services on many others the Romans selected for martyrdom. Athanasius's *The Life of Saint Antony* offers a revealing portrait.

During the last persecution in 311, some Christians were arrested in Egypt and taken to Alexandria. As soon as they heard about it, a number of ascetic monks, including Antony, left their cells and went to Alexandria in support of the martyrs-to-be. Once there, Antony "was busy in the courtroom stimulating the zeal of the contestants as they were called up, and receiving and escorting them as they went to their martyrdom and remaining with them until they had expired" (*Life of Saint Antony*, 1950 ed.). Eventually, the "zeal" of the monks grew too much for the judge, who "gave orders that no monk was to appear in court." Because Antony "had a yearning to suffer martyrdom" but felt it wrong to volunteer, he disobeyed the order and made himself quite visible in court the next day. But it was not to be. The judge ignored him. So, after the last execution, Antony "left and went back to his solitary cell; and there he was a daily martyr to his conscience."

Eugene and Anita Weiner present as clear a picture as we have of martyrdom as a group phenomenon:

> Every effort was made to ensure that the group would witness the events leading up to the martyrdom. It was not uncommon for fellow Christians to visit the accused in their cells and to bring food and clothing to make the imprisonment more bearable. There were even celebrations to dramatize the forthcoming test of faith. These supportive efforts both brought comfort and help in a most trying situation, and had a latent message for the martyr-designate, "what you do and say will be observed and recorded." In a word, it will be significant and passed down in ritual form and celebration.
>
> All martyrs were on stage. Some suffered remorse and recanted but those who could take the pressure were assured of eternity, at least in the memories of the survivors. What was dis-

> tinctive about martyrdom was not only promise of reward in the hereafter, but the certainty of being memorialized in this world. The martyr saw before dying that he or she had earned a place in the memories of the survivors and in the liturgy of the church. (1990:80–81)

For many Christians, especially for those sufficiently prominent to have been accused, these were big stakes. It is hardly surprising that many of them thought it worthwhile to make the supreme sacrifice.

Martyrdom and Christian Confidence

Their faith in life everlasting made it possible for Christians to face death bravely; nevertheless, death presented the early church with a severe crisis of credibility. The promise that most converts would live to see the Lord's return was stressed by the apostles. As Mark 13:30 tells us: "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before these things take place." Within a few years, however, many converts did begin to pass away without having seen "the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory" (Mark 13:26). By "the 60s a whole generation *had* elapsed," as John A. T. Robinson (1976:180) pointed out. Although Robinson acknowledged that the problem of the delayed Parousia persisted for a long time, he suggested that "the question must have been at its most acute" in the sixties.

Most who have written on this topic stress that the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 was widely regarded as the beginning of the "Last Days" and thus served to at least postpone the crisis concerning the Second Coming. Even if this is correct, there existed an acute potential crisis of Christian confidence in the sixties regardless of the promise of an early return by Jesus. Elsewhere I have written at some length about the problems presented to movements by the "dismal arithmetic of first generation growth" and how this often "crushes the confi-

dence" out of new religious movements (Stark 1987:21). That is, most new religious movements begin very small and grow no faster than did early Christianity. Having surveyed a large number of such movements, I noticed that it was typical for the founding generation to apparently lose hope of saving the world, and to turn their movements inward, as they neared the end of their lives. That is, unless something comes along to renew hope and commitment, as the first generation evaluate the results of thirty or forty years of conversion efforts and see that they have succeeded in attracting only two or three thousand members (if that many), they are inclined to lose heart. As this takes place, often a new rhetoric is voiced; this de-emphasizes the importance of growth and explains that the movement has succeeded in gathering a saving remnant, which is all that was ever intended, actually.

Islam never faced this problem because its rapid growth during the Prophet's lifetime, more often by conquest and treaty than by personal conversion, gave no occasion for disappointment. And the Mormons overcame the problem by withdrawing to their own Mormon society, where they amassed confidence from being a majority faith—even if in only one place. Neither solution applies to the early church. When Paul, Peter, and other members of the founding generation looked around in the sixties, they could have counted only something less than three thousand Christians. Not only had Jesus not returned, three decades of missionizing had yielded only these slim results. The New Testament gives us no basis for believing that these men were immune to doubt, and it would be strange had they not sometimes despaired. If they did, how was the problem solved?

It is all well and good to suggest that religions are often able to rationalize failed prophecies and to modify their belief systems sufficiently to overcome such difficulties.[3] But such statements are only descriptive—they do not tell how the shift was accomplished without loss of credibility, how faith was reinforced sufficiently so that revisions in a core doctrine could be

accepted. Moreover, how did the Christians avoid doctrinal shifts away from hopes of converting the multitudes—shifts that similar groups have so often made? How did they gain the moral strength to keep going until eventually their arithmetic of growth ceased to be dismal?

If it is true that a twofold crisis of confidence became most acute in the sixties, then I think it extremely important to note that three rather extraordinary incidents of martyrdom occurred in that same decade.

First, in about 62, James, the brother of Jesus and the head of the church in Jerusalem, was seized along with some of his followers by Ananus, the new high priest. Exploiting the interim between the death of the Roman governor of Judea and the arrival of his replacement, Ananus brought James and the others before the Sanhedrin where they were condemned for breaking Jewish law, then taken out and stoned to death.

Second, after spending several years under arrest in Caesarea Maritima and then being transported to Rome to await the outcome of his appeal to Caesar, the apostle Paul was executed in Rome during 64 or 65. Third, either late in 65 or in 66 (Robinson 1976), Nero launched his persecution of Christians, causing some of them to be torn to pieces in the arena by wild dogs and having others crucified in his garden, sometimes setting the latter on fire "to illuminate the night when daylight failed" (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, 1989 ed.). Among those who died during this first official Roman persecution of Christians was the apostle Peter.

Not only did the three most admired and holy figures of the time die for their faith, undaunted either by the delay of the Second Advent or by the small number of their followers, it would appear that Paul and Peter could have avoided their fates, Paul by recanting and Peter by flight. Moreover, the *Quo Vadis?* story, widely circulated among early Christians (even if it failed eventually to be included in the official canon), provided vivid details about how Peter embraced martyrdom after meeting Jesus on the road out of Rome. It is worth recounting here.

In the *Acts of Peter* we read that an upper-class Roman wife and convert sent word that Peter should flee Rome as he was to be seized and executed. For a time Peter resisted pleas that he should leave:

> "Shall we act like deserters, brethren?" But they said to him, "No, it is so that you can go on serving the Lord." So he assented to the brethren and withdrew himself, saying, "Let none of you retire with me, but I shall retire by myself in disguise." And as he went out the gate he saw the Lord entering Rome; and when he saw him he said, "Lord, where are you going (*quo vadis*)?" And the Lord said to him, "I am going to be crucified." And Peter said to him, "Lord, are you being crucified again?" He said to him, "Yes, Peter, I am being crucified again." And Peter came to himself; and he saw the Lord ascending into Heaven; then he returned to Rome, rejoicing and giving praise to the Lord, because he said, "I am being crucified"; since this was to happen to Peter. (Stead's translation, reprinted in Barnstone 1984:442)

Back among his followers, Peter told them what had taken place and of his new resolve to be crucified. They again tried to dissuade him, but he explained that they were now to serve as the "foundation" so that they might "plant others through him." In the crucifixion account that follows, Peter (crucified upside down at his own request) speaks at length from the cross to a crowd of onlooking Christians about the power of faith in Christ.

Edmondson noted that the encounter with Jesus, "which had caused Peter to turn back and welcome martyrdom, would strike home to the hearts and consciences of any waverers that heard them" ([1913] 1976:153). I think so too. That Peter could gladly follow his Savior to the cross, despite the fact that the end of times was delayed, must have been a powerful reinforcement of faith for Christians not asked to pay such a price for belonging.

In my judgment it was the martyrs of the sixties who eased the crisis of failed prophecy and small numbers, by adding their

suffering to that of Jesus as proof of atonement. In the context of this chapter's earlier discussion of credibility, it seems appropriate to ask how much more credible witnesses could be found than those who demonstrate the worth of a faith by embracing torture and death.

Christian Rewards

But Christianity was not about sacrifice and stigma alone. The fruits of this faith were equally substantial. As a direct result of their sacrifice and stigma, Christians were largely immune to the free-rider problem. Consequently, they were able to produce a very potent religion. The services conducted in those early house churches must have yielded an immense, shared emotional satisfaction.

Moreover, the fruits of this faith were not limited to the realm of the spirit. Christianity offered much to the flesh, as well. It was not simply the promise of salvation that motivated Christians, but the fact that they were greatly rewarded here and now for belonging. Thus while membership was expensive, it was, in fact, a bargain. That is, because the church asked much of its members, it was thereby possessed of the resources to *give* much. For example, because Christians were expected to aid the less fortunate, many of them received such aid, and all could feel greater security against bad times. Because they were asked to nurse the sick and dying, many of them received such nursing. Because they were asked to love others, they in turn were loved. And if Christians were required to observe a far more restrictive moral code than that observed by pagans, Christians—especially women—enjoyed a far more secure family life.

In similar fashion, Christianity greatly mitigated relations among social classes—at the very time when the gap between rich and poor was growing (Meeks and Wilken 1978). It did not preach that everyone could or should become equal in terms of wealth and power in *this* life. But it did preach that all were

equal in the eyes of God and that the more fortunate had a God-given responsibility to help those in need.

As William Schoedel (1991) has noted, Ignatius stressed the responsibility of the church to care for widows and children. Indeed, Ignatius made it clear that he was not simply discussing doctrines about good works but was affirming the reality of a massive structure of Christian voluntarism and charity. Tertullian noted that members willingly gave to the church, which, unlike the pagan temples, did not spend the donations on gluttony:

> For they [the funds] are not taken thence and spent on feasts, and drinking bouts, and eating houses, but to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined to the house; such too as have suffered shipwreck; and if there happen to be any in the mines, or banished to the islands, or shut up in the prisons for nothing but their fidelity to the cause of God's Church, they become nurslings of their confession. (*Apology* 39, 1989 ed.)

Recall from chapter 4 that the apostate emperor Julian agreed that Christians "devoted themselves to philanthropy" and urged pagan priests to compete. But Julian soon discovered that the means for reform were lacking. Paganism had failed to develop the kind of voluntary system of good works that Christians had been constructing for more than three centuries; moreover, paganism lacked the religious ideas that would have made such organized efforts plausible.

But did it matter? Did Christian good works really change the quality of life in Greco-Roman times? Modern demographers regard life expectancy as the best summary measure of the quality of life. It is thus significant that A. R. Burn (1953) found, based on inscriptions, that Christians had longer life expectancies than pagans. If he is correct, then Q.E.D.

The goddess Isis (shown in this statue from Hadrian's villa) was one of the many eastern additions to the Greco-Roman pantheon. Eventually there were more pagan gods than most people could name.