

Morality and Martyrdom

Self-Criminalization and Christian Worship

Ibanga B. Ikpe

University of Botswana, Botswana

Ikpe@mopipi.ub.bw

Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK)

New Series, Vol.5 No.1, June 2013, pp.69-89

thoughtandpractice@gmail.com

<http://ajol.info/index.php/tp/index>

ISSN: 2076-7714

Abstract

Religious martyrdom has grabbed centre stage in recent times. This has been due mainly to the activities of Muslim jihadists and other disaffected religious zealots who choose 'martyrdom' as a form of protest and a means of inflicting injury on their perceived enemies. Much work has been done on the Islamic fundamentalists, who epitomize contemporary martyrdom. Indeed, for the untutored, religious martyrdom appears to be limited to this group. In contrast to such an outlook, this paper seeks to establish the Christian equivalent of contemporary Islamic martyrs. It attempts a broad characterization of different types of martyrdom, taking into account the martyrs of the past and our everyday use of the term 'martyr'. It also explores different perspectives of the morality of martyrdom, especially the more popular self-martyrdom of contemporary times. It identifies self criminalization by religious functionaries as a form of 'martyrdom', especially given the perception of the members of the congregation and the influence that such self-criminalization has on society. It posits the immorality of self criminalization, especially given the high esteem in which society holds religious functionaries, and argues for the de-radicalization of religion.

Key Words

Martyrdom, Christian worship, Self criminalization, self-sacrifice, Morality

Introduction

The proper relationship between the religious and the secular has always been an object of interest, with various scholars advancing diverse views of this relationship. It is a debate that is sometimes forced on the consciousness of the populace when they observe the two to be on a collision course. For some time, the religious and the secular have interacted in an atmosphere of mutual accommodation, but the religious fundamentalism of the recent past has resulted in a toxic relationship between the two. This has forced debate into the public sphere and generated several views concerning the proper relationship between the religious

and the secular. In secular states, religious functionaries, just as ordinary citizens, are subject to secular law, and they often stand forlornly before secular judges to answer to accusations of transgressions of secular law. Charges relating to financial misappropriation, tax evasion, consorting with prostitutes, child molestation, pederasty, drug offences, assault, *crimen injuria* and murder, have at various times been brought against religious functionaries and increasingly, respected men of God, including famed televangelists, have been exposed as common criminals. Such transgressions of secular law and the high profile nature of some of the culprits could be said to have lowered the esteem and moral authority of many religious functionaries and organisations.

The transgression of secular law by religious functionaries that results from human weaknesses, though abhorrent, is not the focus of this paper. This is because, in most cases, those involved in such transgressions are penitent or at least pretend to be when their transgressions become public knowledge. Hardly any are ever so unabashed as to hold their heads high or try to justify their actions with religious texts and sanctions. Such soiled clerics neither declare the righteousness of their actions nor complain of being persecuted for a righteous cause. Rather, they sometimes play the role of remorseful sinners and blame their transgressions on the machinations of the devil, and solicit forgiveness and prayers from their gullible followers.

This paper is about the other category of religious functionaries - those who stand defiantly before the judge, not because of the surreptitious sampling of some 'forbidden fruit', but as religious zealots ready to endure chastisement for the sake of the 'gospel' and eager to repeat the transgression wherever and whenever the 'need' arises. It is about the stoic religious patriot whose single-minded pursuit of biblical perfection and consequent disregard for anything that distracts from that goal puts him at odds with individuals, the society and the laws that govern relationships in it. The primary question of the paper is therefore moral - it is about the morality of such self-criminalization, and, by extension, the morality of unilateralism.

The paper presents an overview of the relationship between the secular and religious realms, and gives examples of how this relationship has changed as secular law battles to control what some people have come to regard as celestial command. It discusses the concept of martyrdom which is often used by offending clerics to describe their trials under secular law.

It attempts a distinction between the concept of martyrdom as understood by the early Christians, as well as the distinction that is sometimes made between true and false martyrdom. Using the Martyrdom of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna and the failed martyrdom of Quintus, a Phrygian Christian as examples, the paper discusses the moral issues that arise from martyrdom. It examines the concept of sacrifice against the background of the view that the Christian self is not worthy of sacrificing to God since it is actually an impediment to the everlasting glory that Christians aspire to. Based on the foregoing considerations, the paper evaluates instances of contemporary self-criminalization by religious functionaries, and argues that since they cannot be shown to constitute genuine self-sacrifice, they cannot be moral.

Christianity and Self-Criminalization

The contemporary Christian church, as a social organisation that exists side by side with individuals and other entities, is guided by the secular laws that govern relationships in the wider society. These laws become necessary not only because some members of the society are not Christians, but also because of the varieties within Christendom and the possibility of friction arising from the peculiar practices of some Christian congregations. Laws also become necessary so that the activities of particular religious groups do not infringe upon the fundamental rights of their members, and also to ensure that the leaders of religious groups do not betray the confidence of their members and the general public. In secular states, these laws are not imposed on religious groups from without, but are part of the corpus of laws that are jointly adopted by all through some form of social contract and can therefore be challenged by any segment of the society that feels that they are unjust or otherwise immoral. Religious communities, despite their total submission to the will of God, need these laws to protect them from the will of men and guarantee them the basic freedoms that safeguard the practice of their faith. To this end, secular laws are not designed to limit religious practices, but are instead meant to ensure that the different faiths are accorded equal protection so that believers and nonbelievers can live harmoniously within society. All things being equal, secular law ought to accord protection to all, and members of society ought to recognise the law as an impartial arbiter in their relationships with one another.

Although secular laws are designed to accord equal protection to all members of the society, individuals may sometimes perceive certain laws to be contrary to their interests. The tenets that govern relationships within society dictate that such individuals either tolerate their discomfort or use appropriate channels to challenge the constitutionality of such laws. This is necessary to ensure that all members of society participate in making and amending laws, so that laws do not injure individuals in society or create conflict among them. What this means is that secular laws, like other human institutions, are not perfect but need to be continually interrogated and refined so as to ensure their continued relevance in a changing world. The responsibility of keeping the law relevant and ensuring that it properly accommodates the interests of individuals and groups not only lies with individuals within society, but also with specialized groups, including religious communities. Christian communities as corporate entities, alongside other citizens of the state share this responsibility. Thus while Christians may sometimes wish to “turn the other cheek” or otherwise “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s”, they still share the responsibility of ensuring that the laws that govern society are fair and just. Where they fail in this regard, they cannot complain when they suffer the chastisement of secular law.

In the years following the separation of church and state in many countries, religious communities could be said to have lived up to the expectation spelt out above. They not only struggled to ensure that many religious sanctions remained part of secular law, but were in the vanguard of protest whenever religious freedoms or secular laws with religious origins were threatened. In many states, individuals and communities were usually willing to accommodate religious views either because of the social standing of religious leaders, or on account of the historical affinities that people had towards particular religions. Religious leaders, on their part, were keen to maintain a certain degree of conservatism, taking care to conceal the indiscretions of their officers and members, and where this failed, to distance themselves from the offenders in an attempt to convince all and sundry that the behaviour was not typical of that religious community. In particular, Christian religious leaders were quite adept at maintaining this veneer of decorum. Using subtle advocacy and internal conservatism, they were careful to avoid conflict with secular law, and generally tried to live up to the moral high ground that was their heritage.

In the recent past, however, this tendency of Christian religious leaders to avoid conflict with the law has been on the wane, especially with the advent of new religious movements with sectarian tendencies. The new movements, especially those that combine messianic zeal and Pentecostal fervour, sometimes have very peculiar views concerning the subordination of Christian rituals to secular law. They sometimes adjudge that their interpretations of biblical exhortations should not be limited by any law, and that they owe no apologies to those who are injured or otherwise inconvenienced by any behaviour that they adjudge to be biblical. One such peculiar interpretation of the bible relates to the cacophonous and often tumultuous racket that has become the hallmark of some Pentecostal and sectarian religious worship. The biblical exhortation to Christians to “make a joyful noise unto the Lord” is given a literal interpretation, and offending congregations refuse to compromise on their right to boisterous and exuberant worship, despite recognizing that such behaviour may constitute a nuisance to their neighbours. The biblical exhortation to “make a joyful noise unto the Lord” is often held to supersede the other exhortation to “love thy neighbour as thyself”, while the golden rule of doing to others as one would like others to do unto them is similarly scorned.

The insistence of these religious movements on their unorthodox interpretation of the gospel and their deep conviction concerning their actions often fuels their willingness to oppose secular institutions and to flout secular laws, especially those that relate to acoustic pollution. The Associated Press report of April 29, 2007, for instance, details the discontent of the neighbours of the Worshipper of Christ the Warrior king Church in Massillon, Ohio over the “screams and sounds of glory and praise” coming from the church building, which the neighbours regard as a nuisance. The pastor of the church, Troy Sowell, insisted that the church was not “loud just to disrupt the neighbours,” but was “going to celebrate Jesus” as guaranteed by the First Amendment of the United States’ constitution. According to him, “We will praise God with a loud voice. If it comes to that, I’m ready to go to jail. ... They might as well come and bring buses because my staff and my members are ready to go to jail for the sake of the gospel” (ABC News 2007R). Sowell maintained this stance even while he was arraigned before a magistrate for violating the city’s noise ordinance. The important issue here is not the violation of city ordinances, but the departure of Sowell from what has become the norm of responsible citizenship. Sowell neither challenged the constitutionality or legality of the law through established channels, nor did he tolerate it for the sake of living peacefully with others. He refused to consider that his action of “celebrating Jesus” could be given a different description, especially by the non-members of his congregation.

Furthermore, the *Brooklyn Paper* reported (Rubinstein 2007) a Criminal Court summons against the Celestial Church of Christ of Clinton Hill for hosting “all day, un-permitted, amplified Sunday services in a building zoned for residential use.” This was after the church had accumulated about \$20,000 for various building violations over a ten year period, including a violation for “occupancy contrary to the certificate of occupancy”. This case is interesting not merely because the offending congregation violated the law, but because of the extensive period over which the violations took place. The case is also interesting because the congregation not only violated the building ordinances, but the noise ordinances as well. Again, the fact that the violations covered a ten year period leaves us in no doubt that the violations were wilful on the part of the congregation. In other words, the congregation had become used to acting outside the law. What is not clear is whether they did so as a protest against laws that they considered offensive or merely continued in the illegal action because they were not physically restrained from doing so.

Again, *The Virginian Pilot* of February 25, 2007 reported the high noise levels emanating from the Holy Temple Ministries at Chesapeake. This was despite an earlier summons and conviction of the minister in charge of the church for misdemeanour over the loud music coming from the church. In the UK, the Christ Apostolic Church in Leytonstone, east London, had to come up with £11,000 in fines, and was reportedly likely to face a court injunction after being convicted for the third time for noise ordinances violations. Here, as in the other cases, it was the amplified music from the services at the church that reportedly constituted a nuisance to its neighbours. As in the case of his American cousins, the response of the pastor to the charges brought against him in the Snaresbrook Crown Court was that “it was not up to him to dampen worshippers' enthusiasm” (Gray 2001).

The cases of contempt for secular law cited above stand in contrast to the case of the Reverend Robert Wesley Hill of the True Apostolic Assembly Church in Minneapolis, who reportedly utilized the judicial process in an attempt to have noise ordinances declared unconstitutional (Sandok 1996). This was after the pastor had received numerous citations for violating state and local anti-noise laws, and even spent time in jail after neighbours complained about the volume of music coming from the church. His initial contempt for the law notwithstanding, Reverend Hill could be said to have demonstrated responsible

citizenship by seeking legal redress for the restraint on his activities. Although the reverend got his heart's desire, getting the court to declare the noise ordinances unconstitutional, it was not because his congregation had been cleared of wrong, but rather because the noise ordinances stipulated different noise levels for different events. Indeed the judge in his ruling declared: "the court is not unsympathetic with the neighbours. The right to peaceful enjoyment of one's property is an important one and is deserving of protection" (The News-Journal 1996). What is important for the purpose of this paper is neither the eventual triumph of the reverend nor his utilization of legal channels to challenge an unjust law, but rather his initial contempt for secular law that resulted in his being sent to jail. Why did he have to be treated as a common criminal before launching his legal battle? The real answer to this question might probably remain unknown, but the event itself points to an emerging pattern in the relationship between church and state.

The cases cited above might give the impression that violations of the law by religious organisations is a peculiarly Western malady, and that African religious leaders are not caught up in this growing tendency to wilfully criminalize themselves. This view can however not be sustained, given the fact that some of the offending religious organisations (Celestial Church of Christ and the Christ Apostolic Church) in Western countries are of African origin. In African countries themselves, the relationship between religious organisations and secular authorities also reflects this emerging pattern of conflict and wilful self criminalization, especially in relation to the violation of noise ordinances. This is despite the fact that the noise ordinances are neither as strict nor as closely monitored as those in the West. For instance, a Ghana News Agency Report of March 30, 2007 has a story concerning the refusal of Power Miracle Chapel International to comply with a court order to minimise the noise and not to use musical instruments that produced loud noise. This is despite the contention of the presiding judge that "in God's kingdom, there is order and discipline and that worshipping must be done in a fine manner" (JoyFM 2007). The pastor in charge of the church, Prophet Mensah, and the congregation were eventually charged with making excessive noise and causing noise nuisance. In another case in the Ghanaian capital, Sam Isaac Opoku, Head Pastor of the Jesus Demonstration Ministry International was remanded in custody for leading his congregation to cause noise nuisance above the permissible level at Nii Boi Town, Accra. Here again, this action was taken after an initial warning and two weeks of monitoring the noise levels of the church (Ghana News Agency 2008). The two cases above, which involved recurrent violation of the law and wilful self-criminalization by

the pastors and their congregations, are cast in the same mould as the American and British cases.

Although the foregoing cases may appear few and far between, they are actually symptomatic of what goes on in many localities, as secular law battles to control what some people have come to regard as celestial command. The offending clerics and congregations do not regard themselves as common criminals but rather as martyrs, and it is the glory of martyrdom that motivates their criminal behaviour. The offending clerics would rather be in jail or suffer other secular penalties than ‘disobey the gospel’ or otherwise limit any aspect of what they regard as their religious obligations. In doing so, they appear to be emulating the early Christians, whose persecution and martyrdom encouraged the faithful of the early church and strengthened the faith of those who were willing to spread the gospel in subsequent centuries. The erring congregations appear to regard their criminalization as a form of religious persecution and therefore an ornament that should be proudly displayed. Like martyrs of yesteryears, they appear to believe that eternal reward awaits them for standing firm and propagating the gospel in the face of persecution. But are they martyrs in the true sense of the word, and can we adjudge their actions to be moral?

Understanding Martyrdom

An important question for this paper has to do with whether or not the type of self-criminalization in the cases cited above amounts to martyrdom. The question arises not merely because such self-criminalization is used to justify violation of the law, but also because the idea is becoming popular among religious congregations. There is no doubt that suffering persecution, imprisonment and other deprivations involves enormous self-sacrifice; but does this constitute martyrdom, and do these modern day violators of the law compare with the martyrs of early Christianity? This question becomes even more pertinent when we consider that the term martyr is commonly used to refer to “a person who in an extremely hostile situation prefers a violent death to compliance with the demand of (usually pagan) authorities” (Van Henten & Avemarie 2002, 3). At its origin in the early Christian era, it was used to refer to Christian zealots who paid the ultimate price for the sake of their faith, and was first used in the martyrdom of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna. According to Mahmoud Ayoub, “the term ‘martyr’ as used in the New Testament, means ‘witness’. A martyr is a

witness not to an idea but to an event, to the faith in the crucified and risen Christ” (Ayoub1992, 69). Thus the early Christian martyrs did not propagate any ideology, but were contented to vehemently defend the historical events surrounding the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The etymology of the word notwithstanding, van Henten observes that “the phenomenon of martyrdom is older than the Christian or Jewish terminology that indicates it” (Van Henten 2003, 194-195). Thus although the term was specially coined to refer to the early Christian martyrs, the name could, for instance, apply to Socrates and others who died for their beliefs prior to the advent of Christianity.

Despite its Christian origins, the term ‘martyr’ has grown to be popular, and has been applied to many forms of heroic deaths that have no bearing on Christianity or any other religion. According to van Henten, the martyr has come to be recognised as “a member of a suppressed group, who, when given the opportunity to renounce aspects of his or her group’s code, willingly submits to suffering and death, rather than forsake a conviction” (van Henten 2003, 200). The idea of being ‘a member of a suppressed group’ seems to match the sectarian character of some new religious movements who sometimes see their persecution as resulting from the authenticity of their faith. van Henten’s contention that martyrs willingly submit to suffering and death rather than renounce aspects of their group code also resonates with the tendency of these religious communities to violate aspects of secular law and thereby willingly criminalize themselves. What needs to be determined is whether being a member of a suppressed group and thereby willingly submitting to suffering rather than denouncing the groups code is sufficient for martyrdom.

Van Henten also contends that “being a victim of condemnable violence seems to be an important notion of contemporary martyrdom which is not necessarily linked to religious identities” (van Henten 2003, 199). This could be interpreted to mean that death is no longer a requirement for martyrdom since condemnable violence can take forms other than death. This position also seems to suggest that one can be a martyr without having the option to either renounce the group code or otherwise submit to the penalties of failing to do so. Thus contemporary martyrdom does not only entail the possibility of martyrdom without violent death, but also removes volition as a prerequisite for martyrdom. Again, the passivity that characterized the early Christian martyrs seems to have given way to activity such that the martyr no longer merely submits to martyrdom but can, in the new dispensation, actively seek martyrdom. Thus from its restricted use in early Christianity, the term has evolved to

accommodate various forms of violence against the faithful, including different forms of self-sacrifice.

Furthermore, in discussing martyrdom, Ayoub (1992, 69) refers to the ideal martyr of Christianity as one who, for the sake of the gospel, “suffered stripes, imprisonment, crucifixion and wild beast.” This seems to entail that one defends a creed which one holds to be true but which others, either of the same faith or of different faiths, consider deviant. Robert Klob (1995, 400) makes the same point while discussing martyrdom during the early reformation when he notes that , “martyrdom was not a matter of dying for just any faith but for what they regarded as the true faith.” The problem then, as it is now, involves determining what constitutes the true faith, or otherwise determine who is competent to say whether or not a faith is true. This is due to the fact that everyone who practices a faith does so because of some deep seated conviction that the faith is true, even when such a faith or variation of a faith has very few adherents. In other words, all faiths are true to those who practice them, even when such faiths do not make it into mainstream beliefs. The problem then is in determining who is competent to judge whether or not a faith is true.

In the early Christian period for instance, many zealots suffered and died both at the hands of unbelievers and at the hands of other believers whose understanding of Christianity was different from theirs. The recent discoveries of the gospels of Mary Magdalene (Hearon 2004) and of Judas (Gathercole 2007) show that there were variations in early Christianity, and it seems reasonable to assume that if the Romans persecuted the early Christians without discrimination, there must have been several sects of early Christianity whose activities were never chronicled. It appears inescapable that such undocumented Christian sects had zealots who paid the ultimate price, but have been forgotten or have otherwise not been celebrated because their sects were not recognised as true by the chroniclers of early Christianity. The said zealots were, however, in no doubt about the truth of their faith, otherwise they would not have accepted to pay such a handsome price for it. One could therefore argue that if it were their followers that chronicled the events of that era, they would have gone down in history as the true martyrs. It would then seem to follow that all faiths are true for those who practice them, but whether or not they go down in history as true faith would be more of a historical accident than the desire or design of the faithful.

Morality and Martyrdom

The question whether or not martyrdom is moral has engaged scholars for a long time, and continues to generate interest among members of the academic community. This is because although “to intentionally give up one's life on behalf of an ideal or another person may be seen as the ultimate demonstration of one's moral commitment ... unless it is regarded as having been done by the right agent on behalf of a properly worthy object, in a very particular context, it is likely to be regarded as inexplicable or just plain crazy” (Bailey 2009, 131). In determining whether or not martyrdom is moral, there is need to understand the circumstances surrounding a particular case of martyrdom, especially the intention of the martyr. This is necessary because the intention of an agent is important in determining the morality of the actions of that agent. Where the actions of an agent are not purposive, such action cannot be said to be moral or immoral; but where an agent acts with the intent of achieving results that the agent understands to be either morally acceptable or morally reprehensible, the action can be judged to be either moral or immoral. Consequently, if an agent purposively acts immorally or refrains from acting when a moral action ought to have been taken, the intentional nature of the action or inaction renders it immoral. The intention of the agent in martyrdom is, therefore, significant in the sense that it determines whether or not the martyrdom is genuine. For instance, one of the ancient narratives on martyrdom attempts a distinction between true and false martyrdom. The narrative, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, is an anonymous eyewitness account written as a letter from the church at Smyrna to the church at Philomelia detailing the arrest and execution of Polycarp (see Anonymous 1855). The author distinguishes between the true martyrdom of Polycarp, which he refers to as ‘martyrdom according to the gospel’, and the failed martyrdom of a Phrygian Christian named Quintus. The difference between the two is that whereas Polycarp followed the example of Jesus in that he was betrayed without manipulating the situation, Quintus voluntarily handed himself over to the Roman authorities to be martyred, but in the course of trial and facing the reality of being devoured by wild beasts, renounced Christ and made sacrifices to the emperor.

The difference between Polycarp and Quintus is in their intentions. Whereas Quintus actively sought martyrdom with the intention of being revered, Polycarp did not intend to be martyred, and would have been content to continue serving the church in his capacity as a bishop. Again in handing himself over to be martyred, Quintus did not go quietly, but

announced his intention to be martyred, and even put pressure on some of his followers to join him. Warren Smith (2006, 171) observes that “behind Quintus’s voluntary martyrdom ... lies the motive of spiritual ambition – to gain salvation for himself and to achieve the greatness of a true disciple whose death imitates Christ’s own self-sacrifice.” Here, one could argue that the failed martyrdom of Quintus was a project in self aggrandizement rather than one of genuine piety. The intention of the martyr in determining whether or not a case of martyrdom is true is also emphasised by Koçan & Öncü (2006,350), when they identify Bobby Sands and his Irish comrades as true martyrs. For them, Sands and his comrades are true martyrs because they “accepted death with tremendous courage, but they did not essentially seek it”. In other words, as Irish revolutionaries, their true intention was aligned to Irish republicanism, and even though capture and imprisonment were possibilities, they were not eventualities that the group actively desired. Besides, when they started their hunger strike to protest their being treated as common criminals, their intention was to further the cause of Irish republicanism rather than to die a heroic death.

The idea of determining the genuineness of martyrdom by evaluating the intentions of the martyr is not entirely new: it has been considered by different scholars at different times. Nietzsche, for instance, looks upon Christian martyrdom as “a form of the will to power, in that it seeks to overcome the meaninglessness of life – especially life’s inescapable suffering - by finding meaning in suffering” (cited in Smith 2006, 171). This is because Christianity looks upon earthly life as a life of suffering and pain - a difficult period of transition to a more glorious afterlife. Martyrdom therefore offers the Christian a chance to escape the laborious trek towards the afterlife - a journey, with paths strewn with obstacles that could derail even the most faithful and condemn them to eternal damnation. According to Kauffman (2008, 255), Nietzsche’s view is that what the martyrs “desire is power itself; another life as it were, richer and stronger; a rebirth in beauty and perfection.” Nietzsche takes his cue from the biblical verse that “everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and everyone who humbles himself will be exalted”(Luke 18:14) to argue that it is actually the desire of the martyr to be exalted, and that it is this desire that fuels the stoic stride towards martyrdom. Given the intention of the Christian martyrs to attain eternal glory by suffering and sometimes dying for the Christian cause, their sacrifice is neither selflessness nor a sign of supreme moral commitment, but rather a short-cut to eternal glory.

F.H. Bradley also has an interesting view of self-sacrifice, especially as it applies to Christian martyrdom. For him, as for many other thinkers, martyrdom is moral when it entails the “sacrifice of something actually or potentially good that could reasonably contribute, within moral limits, to one’s well-being or better being and to do so for the sake of the well-being or better being of others” (cited in Kateb 2008, 373). In other words, for something to be a sacrifice, it must be something which the person making the sacrifice would rather have but chooses to give up for the sake of another being or for a cause that the person believes in. But where the self is worth nothing, Bradley argues that self-sacrifice is unworthy and therefore immoral. For Bradley as for many other scholars, the self of a Christian is not worthy of sacrifice because it is worth nothing. The self of the Christian is actually an inconvenience, an albatross which the Christian has to get rid of in order to attain life everlasting. Getting rid of it cannot therefore be a sacrifice, but rather something beneficial to one making the sacrifice, whereas true sacrifice entails giving up something valuable for the well being of others. What this means is that a sacrifice or self-denial cannot be moral except where there are others who stand to benefit from it. What is not clear is whether the utilitarian principle needs to be applied in calculating those who stand to benefit from a sacrifice; in other words, whether having more gainers than losers makes a sacrifice more worthy. The presumption here is that in every sacrifice some people stand to lose while others stand to gain.

In discussing the nature of a moral sacrifice, Bradley also argues that where the subject on whose behalf the sacrifice is performed is unworthy, the sacrifice may be seen to be lacking in sufficient worth (cited in Bailey 2009, 132). In other words, where the subject is unworthy of the sacrifice, such a sacrifice cannot be moral. For instance, it would be immoral for one to sacrifice oneself in order to save a pet because the pet is qualitatively inferior to a human being, and is therefore unworthy of human sacrifice. Although it may appear fairly straightforward to decide that it is not worthwhile to sacrifice human life for a pet, it is not always so easy to determine whether or not a being deserves to benefit from a sacrifice. This is because the being so worthy may be determined by factors that have nothing to do with the intrinsic qualities of the subject, but may depend on personal or cultural values that may be tainted by racist, sexist, ethnocentric and other considerations that ought not to contribute to moral choice.

A more comprehensive characterization of self-sacrifice which may offer an insight into the morality of martyrdom, is offered by Connie Rosati as an alternative to an earlier analysis by Mark Overvold (1980, 113-114). According to her, an act is a genuine instance of self-sacrifice just in case:

- The act results in a loss of welfare that is expected and anticipated.
- The act is voluntary.
- The act is undertaken primarily out of regard for the value or good of another rather than out of regard for long term self benefit.
- The agent is aware of at least one other alternative open at the time of the act the consequences of which she correctly expected would have been, in some respects, more in her immediate self-interest.
- Any adverse effect on her self interest as a consequence of her chosen act is on some part of her good such that the sacrifice of that part of her good is also a sacrifice of herself (Rosati 2009, 320).

Apart from clearly setting out the conditions for genuine acts of self-sacrifice and, by extension, martyrdom, Rosati's characterisation avoids Bradley's emphasis on the subject for whom the sacrifice is made and the difficulties arising therefrom. It is also unambiguous concerning the relationship of the agent to both the act of sacrifice and the subjects that benefit from it. By this characterisation, Christian martyrdom will entail that the agent sacrifice some aspects of his/her welfare, but also that in making the sacrifice he/she stands in a proper relationship to the beneficiaries of the sacrifice and the sacrificial act.

Morality and Self Criminalization

The foregoing analysis offers some interesting insights into recent self criminalisation by religious leaders and communities. A situation where religious leaders give interviews concerning their willingness to go to jail with their congregations rather than tone down the noise generated by their worship could be said to be similar to Quintus' announcing of his intention to be martyred and putting pressure on his followers to join him. Furthermore, in giving elaborate interviews and turning themselves into media personalities, they, like Quintus, appear to be seeking their own glory rather than the cause they supposedly

represent. The humility, dignity and resignation that attended the martyrdom of Polycarp are not evident in their behaviour, and this raises the question as to whether or not their self-sacrifice is genuine and therefore moral. In addition, when we compare their relish at their impending ‘martyrdom’ with the fear of cowardice expressed in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch while he was being taken to Rome for execution, their self-sacrifice rings hollow.

Furthermore, Nietzsche’s contention that the physical body of a Christian is not a worthy object of sacrifice introduces an interesting angle to the discussion. This is because the true ‘self’ of a Christian is the spiritual self which remains untouched by earthly deprivations. Whereas “the tyrant can destroy the body, the spirit of the martyr escapes his control” and this is to say that “the tyrant’s destructive physical powers cannot conquer the martyr’s spiritual power” (Tod & Stichele 2003, 178). If destroying the body does not affect the true self of the Christian, one can argue that any Christian self-sacrifice that does not involve sacrificing the spiritual self is not a meaningful sacrifice. What is more, in assessing the worth of a sacrifice, there is need to determine whether the sacrifice is of value to another or whether it is for the long term benefit of the agent. An act of genuine sacrifice by a Christian could, following Rosati’s characterization, be said to be valuable either to God or to other Christians. It cannot be said to be of value to God because, by His nature, the Christian God is a colossus who cannot be edified by the acts of men. The Bible sets this out when it says that “we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousness are like filthy rags” (Isaiah 64, 6). This is to say that one cannot genuinely sacrifice the human self to God. This is especially so since Christians usually hold Christ to be the sacrifice to end all sacrifices.

If the self-sacrifice cannot be for God, it must be for the benefit of people who would either belong to the same religious community as the martyr or be outside the community. van Henten (2003, 206), for instance, argues that “martyrs are constructed by their source groups; they function as role model figure for this group and express group values, norms, practices and aims in a radical manner.” A martyr therefore, as a social construct, can only have value within their source group, and their sacrifice can only be said to benefit the group. What this means is that the self-criminalization by religious leaders can only be for the benefit of their congregations and perhaps others who are aware of the circumstances of the group and are moved by sympathy for them. Other members of the community who are not aware of the trials of the martyr or are otherwise indifferent to his convictions cannot be said to benefit from his sacrifice. The question may then arise as to whether or not it is morally right for a

leader to wilfully commit acts that may deprive his group of his leadership, especially where the group is small and depends on the charisma of the leader to survive. This is because not only is it required that what is sacrificed be something worthwhile, but also that it contribute something actually or potentially good to the group.

Applying Rosati's (2009, 320) characterization also raises questions concerning the genuineness and, by extension, the morality of self-criminalisation by religious leaders. *First*, it is difficult to say whether self-criminalization results in any loss of welfare by the religious leaders. This is because although judicial sanction may entail a temporary loss of welfare, religious leaders usually believe that they stand to gain eternal life from that loss. The loss of welfare therefore appears to be an investment that is guaranteed to yield greater dividends in the hereafter. It is also doubtful whether the self-criminalization is undertaken primarily out of regard for the benefit of any but the clerics themselves. Apart from the long-term benefit of eternal salvation that the cleric anticipates at the time of his action, there is also the short term benefit of media exposure which portrays him as a true Christian. The media exposure may also serve as an advertisement for the movement, helping it to attract new members and increase the popularity of the cleric and his congregation. While there is a possibility that these benefits can be anticipated in genuine piety, the fact that they are anticipated at all limits the sacrificial nature of the act under Rosati's characterization.

Moreover, Rosati's characterization requires that the agent be "aware of at least one other alternative open at the time of the act the consequences of which she correctly expected would have been, in some respects, more in her immediate self-interest"; but there does not seem to be any such alternative in the cases under review. One could argue, for instance, that acceding to the request of the neighbours by limiting the noise during worship is such an alternative. This, however, is not the case. The claim by some of the clerics that the noise-making is a religious exhortation makes it difficult for a concession to the neighbours to serve as a genuine alternative to it. This is because such a concession would not be in their immediate self-interest of pleasing God or attracting more membership. Another alternative would be for the offending clerics to show remorse during trial and plead for a lighter or suspended sentence. This, also, does not appear to be a genuine alternative under Rosati's characterization, because the freedom it would have secured would not have been in the immediate interest of the group, as it would have required that it changes its mode of worship

and perhaps others of its characteristic features. In addition, climbing down in the face of confrontation, though useful in averting the sanctions of the court, could possibly lower their esteem as leaders in the eyes of their congregations. Thus what appears to be alternatives to martyrdom do not seem to be in the long term interest of the clerics. This is especially so since “people become martyrs because others make them so” (van Henten 2002, 7). For instance, there have been people who paid the ultimate price for a cause that they believed in but were never recognized as martyrs, whereas others who paid such a price by accident have been so recognized.

Conclusion

It would appear from the foregoing reflections that contempt for secular law, as exemplified in the self-criminalization of modern day clerics, cannot be classified as genuine self-sacrifice. This is because the inconvenience suffered by the agents in the course of prosecution cannot be said to represent a substantial loss of welfare by the clerics. On the contrary, it could be argued that the benefits that accrue to them is greater both in the short and long term. It is also clear that the consequences of the various alternatives to self-criminalisation are not in the immediate or long term interest of the clerics, and therefore do not qualify as genuine alternatives as defined by Rosati. Consequently, their self-criminalisation cannot qualify as genuine martyrdom, and cannot therefore be moral. The redeeming features of martyrdom do not apply in these cases, and can therefore not be invoked in evaluating their actions. It is also important to note that “morality requires positive acts and is not exhausted by virtuous or prudent abstention from wrongdoing” (Kateb 2008, 387). Thus a willingness to submit to secular law and therefore be acted upon, such as is evident in self-criminalization, cannot qualify as genuine morality.

In his book, *Morality: Its Nature and Justification*, Bernard Gert (cited in Brock 2001, 435) argues that the goal of morality is to lessen the amount of evil or harm suffered. This is why Gert’s first five moral rules prohibit actions that cause harm (killing, disabling, causing pain, depriving of pleasure or freedom), and his second five moral rules do this indirectly by prohibiting actions that typically result in harm (lying, breaking promises, cheating, breaking the law and not doing one's duty). Since noise pollution causes severe discomfort to the neighbours of such churches by depriving them of the pleasure of living in a quiet

neighbourhood, wilfully causing such pollution cannot be a moral act. Furthermore, since the contempt of the clerics for noise ordinances involves breaking the law, it cannot at the same time be moral. Going by the old Socratic dictum that “it is better to suffer possible evil than to inflict it”, neither the noise-making through boisterous worship nor the willingness to endure suffering on account of it can be seen as genuine morality.

References

- ABCNews. 2007. "Neighborhood, Church Stand Off Over Noise". *ABC News*.
<http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Story?id=3097189&page=2>.
- Anonymous. 1855. "The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna". Hoole, Charles H.
 Trans. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/martyrdompolycarp-hoole.html>
- Bailey, Cathryn. 2009. "A Man a Dog in a Lifeboat: Self Sacrifice, Animals and the Limits of Ethical Theory". *Ethics and the Environment*, Vol.14 No.1, pp.129 - 148.
- Brock, Dan W. "Gert on the Limits of Morality's Requirements". *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol.LXII No.2, pp.435-440.
- Clayton, Cindy. 2007. "Dialogue sought as church is still target of noise complaints". *The Virginian Pilot*. <http://hamptonroads.com/node/229351>.
- Gathercole, Simon. 2007. "The Gospel of Judas". *Expository Times*, Vol.118 Issue 5, pp209-215.
- GhanaNewsAgency. 2008. "Pastor Remanded Over Noise Nuisance from his Church". Ghana News Agency. <http://www.modernghana.com/news2/155792/1/pastor-remanded-over-noise-nuisance-from-his-church.html>
- Gray, Chris. 2001. "Clergyman fined £11,000 for noise". *The Independent*.
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/clergyman-fined-pound11000-for-noise-673841.html>.
- Hearon, Holly E. 2004. *The Mary Magdalene tradition: witness and counter-witness in early Christian communities*. Collegeville, Minn. : Liturgical Press.
- JoyFM. 2007. "Court Restrains Church from Conducting Noisy Services". Accra: Ghana News Agency. <http://news.myjoyonline.com/news/200703/2356.asp>.
- Kateb, George. 2008. "Morality and Self-Sacrifice, Martyrdom and Self-Denial". *Social Research*, Vol.75 No.2, pp.353-394.
- Kolb, Robert. 1995. "God's Gift of Martyrdom: The Early Reformation Understanding of Dying for the Faith". *Church History*, Vol.64 No.3, pp.399 - 411.
- Kaufmann, Walter. 2008. *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist Antichrist*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Overvold, Mark C. 1980. "Self Interest and the Concept of Self-Sacrifice". *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.10, pp.105-118.
- Rosati, Connie S. 2009. "Self-Interest and Self-Sacrifice". *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, no. CIX, pp.311 - 325.
- Rubinstein, Dana. 2007. "Thou Shalt not Make a Noise". *The Brooklyn Paper*.
http://www.brooklynpaper.com/stories/30/27/30_27noisychurch.html.
- Sandok, Mary R. 1996. "Church Makes a lot of Noise to the Lord". *Herald Journal*.
<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=q7YeAAAIBAJ&sjid=XM8EAAAIBAJ&pg=2864,1571825&hl=en>.
- Smith, J. Warren. 2006. "Martyrdom: Self Denial or Self Exaltation? Motives for Self-Sacrifice from Homer to Polycarp. A Theological Reflection". *Modern Theology*, Vol.22 No.2, pp.169-196.
- The News-Journal. 1996. "Noise Charges Dismissed". *The News-Journal*.
- Van Henten, Jan Willem and Freidrich Avemarie. 2002. *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from the Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Antiquity*. London: Routledge.

Van Henten, W.J. 2003. "Internet Martyrs and Violence: Victims and/or Perpetrators?"
Bekkenkamp, J. and Y. Sherwood eds. *Sanctified Aggression: Legacies of Biblical
and Post-Biblical Vocabularies of Violence*. London: T&T Clark International.