

Martyrdom & Meaning
Georgetown University
Summer 2025

Instructor: Rosanne Morici
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Office hours: TBD

**Students are encouraged to meet with the instructor throughout the course of the semester if they experience difficulties of any kind.*

"It's really important to get somehow into the mind and make it move somewhere it has never moved before. That happens partly because the material is mysterious or unknown but mostly because of the way you push the material around from word to word in a sentence.... Given whatever material we're going to talk about, and we all know what it is, how can we move within it in a way we've never moved before, mentally? That seems like the most exciting thing to do with your head."
- Anne Carson

Course Description

How does tragedy become a catalyst for change?
How does suffering become an occasion for truth-telling?
How does an underdog become a hero?

The term “martyrdom” appears widely in contemporary religious and political cultures. While the martyr feels like such a recognizable figure, it is also a concept whose precise definition and appropriate deployment feel impossible to pin down. Martyrdom is never simply a single act, but a cultural system forming and being formed by an audience or community of interpreters. This course traces the development and use of martyrdom to generate meaning out of suffering and to establish a relationship between violence, belonging, and truth. We begin with classical and early Jewish, Christian, and Muslim sources, and then end with other self-sacrificial phenomena in Chinese Buddhism and Japanese samurai culture, considering the felt effects of this history on the present. Along the way, we will examine how martyrdom across diverse traditions, communities, and histories has participated in the construction, maintenance, and contestation of social order with attention to the power relations and identity formations (around gender, ethnicity, citizenship) that are reflected and challenged in the process.

Course Requirements

Regular Attendance & Active Participation 10%: Students are permitted 2 absences. Exceeding 2 absences will result in a failing participation grade. If you are having trouble attending our meetings for any reason, please let me know. Students are expected to complete assigned readings for the beginning of the class period listed on the course syllabus. In addition, students should have the assigned readings available during class discussions for reference and note-taking.

2 Canvas Discussion Posts (200 words each) 15%

2 Secondary Source Abstracts (1 page each) 15%

1 Primary Source Analysis (5 pages) 25%

1 Final Essay (6-8 pages) 35%

Course Books

Plato, *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo* (available online through The Internet Classics Archive)
Bible with Apocrypha (NRSV) (available online)
+ Margaret Cormack, *Sacrificing the Self: Perspectives on Martyrdom and Religion* (available online through Georgetown University Library)
* Other Readings found on Canvas

Reading & Discussion Schedule

Week 1: Sacrifice & Noble Death

Monday 7/7: + Introduction of *Sacrificing the Self*

*Justin Watson, *The Martyrs of Columbine: Faith and the Politics of Tragedy*, Introduction and Chapter 2 (2002)

Tuesday 7/8: *Sophocles, *Antigone*

*Stephen Palmer, "Martyrdom and Conflict: The Fate of Antigone in Tragic Drama," *Mortality* (2014): 206-223

Wednesday 7/9: Hebrew Bible Readings: Genesis 22, Daniel 1-6

+Marc Brettler, "Is There Martyrdom in the Hebrew Bible?"
"The Sacrifice of Isaac" in Art Discussion

Thursday 7/10: Plato, *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*

*****Friday 7/11: "Antigone in Ferguson" (Canvas Discussion #1) due by 11:59pm**

Week 2: The Graeco-Roman World

Monday 7/14: I Maccabees 1-6, 2 Maccabees 6 and 7, 4 Maccabees 5-7 & 16, Daniel 7-12 (Bible & Apocrypha)

*Jan Willem Van Henten, Friedrich Avemarie, *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Antiquity*, 76-87

Tuesday 7/15: Christian New Testament Readings:

The Gospel of Mark 8:31-9:10; 14:32-16:20

The Gospel of Matthew 5:1-12; 10:16-33

1 Corinthians 1:26 – 2:6

2 Corinthians 4:7-18; 12:1-10

Galatians 3:28

Philippians 2:5-11

Hebrews 9:24-28

Wednesday 7/16: *Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans*

*Vincent Wimbush, "'...Not of This World...': Early Christianities as Rhetorical and Social Formation," in *Reimagining Christian Origins: A Colloquium Honoring Burton L. Mack*, ed. Elizabeth Castelli and Hal Taussig (1996), 23-36

Thursday 7/17: *The Martyrdom of Polycarp

+Carlin Barton: "Honor and Sacredness in the Roman and Christian Worlds"

+Carole Straw, "'A Very Special Death': Christian Martyrdom in Its Classical Context"

Week 3: Early Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism

Monday 7/21: *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas

*Martyrs of Lyons, Eusebius, Eccles. Hist. 5:1ff

*Brent D. Shaw, "Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs," *J ECS* 4 (1996): 296-312

Tuesday 7/22: *Acts of Paul and Thekla (NTA 239-246)

*Stavroula Constantinou, "Thekla the Virgin: Women's Sacrifice and the Generic Martyr," in *The 'Other' Martyrs: Women and the Poetics of Sexuality, Sacrifice, and Death in World Literatures*, ed. Alireza Korangy and Leyla Rouhi (2019), 73-86

Wednesday 7/23: *Jan Willem Van Henten, Friedrich Avemarie, *Martyrdom and Noble Death*, 132-76

*David G. Roskies, ed., "The Ten Harugei Malkhut" 60-69, *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*

Thursday 7/24: *David G. Roskies, ed., "History as Liturgy in Ashkenaz" 71-88, and "Ghetto

Preachers" 503-509, *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*

+Lawrence Fine, "Contemplative Death in Jewish Mystical Tradition"

Week 4: Islam

Monday 7/28: *The Qur'an (translated by M. Fakhry) Suras 3, 9, & 22

*David Cook, "Martyrdom in the Genesis of Islam," *Martyrdom in Islam* (2007), 12-30

+Keith Lewinstein, "The Revaluation of Martyrdom in Early Islam"

Tuesday 7/29: *David Cook, "Sectarian Islam: Sunni, Shi'ite and Sufi Martyrdom," *Martyrdom in Islam* (2007), 45-73

*Tahera Qutbuddin, "Orations of Zaynab and Umm Kulthum in the Aftermath of Husayn's Martyrdom at Karbala: Speaking Truth to Power," in *The 'Other' Martyrs: Women and the Poetics of Sexuality, Sacrifice, and Death in World Literatures*, ed. Alireza Korangy and Leyla Rouhi (2019), 103-132

+Daniel Brown, "Martyrdom in Sunni Revivalist Thought"

Wednesday 7/30: Presentations

Thursday 7/31: Presentations

*****Friday 8/1: Primary Source Analysis due by 11:59pm**

Week 5: Comparative Perspective

Monday 8/4: +Lindsey Harlan, "Truth and Sacrifice: Sati Immolations in India"

+S. Dennis Hudson, "Self-Sacrifice as Truth in India"

Tuesday 8/5: *Tammy Castle, "Self-Immolation" in *Religion and Violence: An Encyclopedia of Faith and Conflict from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Jeffrey Ian Ross (2010)

*James Benn, "Fire and the Sword: Some Connections between Self-Immolation and Religious Persecution in the History of Chinese Buddhism," *The Buddhist Dead: Practices, Discourses, Representations* (2007), 234-265

Wednesday 8/6: *Patricia Power, “Seppuku” in *Religion and Violence: An Encyclopedia of Faith and Conflict from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Jeffrey Ian Ross (2010)
*Doris Bergen, “Sacrifice and Self-Sacrifice,” “The Japanese Custom of Junshi,” and “The Sword and the Brush,” *Suicidal Honor: General Nogi and the Writings of Mori Ogai and Natsume Soseki* (2006), 11-30; 64-82
***** “The Inscrutability of Martyrdom” (Canvas Discussion #2) due by 5:45pm**

Thursday 8/7: **Last Day of Class ***Final Essay due by 11:59pm**

Primary Source Dates

Genesis – ca. 1000 – 600 BCE
Daniel – ca. 500 – 200 BCE
Antigone – ca. 441 BCE
Plato – ca. 399 – 360 BCE
Maccabees – ca. 100 – 63 BCE
Post-biblical Rabbinic accounts – ca. 25 BCE – 200 CE
Pauline Letters – ca. 50 CE
Mark – ca. 70 CE
Matthew – ca. 100 CE
Ignatius – ca. 105 CE
Polycarp – ca. 150 CE
Acts of Paul and Thekla – ca. 200 CE
Perpetua & Felicitas – ca. 203 CE
Martyrs of Lyons – ca. 326 CE
Qur’an Suras 3, 9, 22 – compiled 651 CE
Orations of Zaynab and Umm Kulthum – 680 CE
Solomon Bar Simson Crusade Chronicle – ca. 1140 CE
“Ghetto Preachers” – 1943 CE

Course Policies

- Any instance of cheating or plagiarism will be referred to the honor council.
<https://honorcouncil.georgetown.edu/>
 - All work submitted for this course must be your own.
 - I understand that AI programs can be useful tools for brainstorming and enhancing your own critical thinking, but you may not submit any work generated by an AI program.
 - Because programs like ChatGPT generate text by drawing from many publicly available, previously published sources without citing those specific sources and giving proper credit to their creators, you cannot include (or even paraphrase) AI generated writing since there’s no way to properly cite its sources.
- Any work found to have been plagiarized will receive a failing grade.
- Late work will receive a 5-point deduction if submitted within the first 48 hours after the deadline, and a 10-point deduction if submitted any time after that.
- Please speak with respect and care for those who might disagree with you.
- Please respect the class process and your peers by coming to class on time.
- Please refrain from leaving in the middle of class except in case of emergency.
- Please silence your phones.

Sexual Misconduct

Georgetown University and its faculty and staff are committed to supporting survivors and those impacted by sexual misconduct, which includes sexual assault, sexual harassment, relationship violence, and stalking. Georgetown requires faculty members, unless otherwise designated as confidential, to report all disclosures of sexual misconduct to the University Title IX Coordinator or a Deputy Title IX Coordinator. If you disclose an incident of sexual misconduct to a professor or staff member in or outside of the classroom (with the exception of disclosures in papers), that faculty or staff member must report the incident to the Title IX Coordinator, or Deputy Title IX Coordinator. The coordinator will, in turn, reach out to the student to provide support, resources, and the option to meet. Please note that the student is not required to meet with the Title IX coordinator and no action will be taken without the student's awareness. More information about reporting options and resources can be found on the Sexual Misconduct Website:

<https://sexualassault.georgetown.edu/resourcecenter>.

If you would prefer to speak to someone confidentially, Georgetown has a number of fully confidential professional resources that can provide support and assistance. These resources include:

- Health Education Services: Sexual Assault Response and Prevention: sarp@georgetown.edu
- Counseling and Psychiatric Services (CAPS): 202.687.6985

Additional resources are included below:

- Georgetown Self-Care Resource Guide: <https://studenthealth.georgetown.edu/health-promotion/self-care/>
- Georgetown Wellness Wheel: <https://studenthealth.georgetown.edu/hoya-wellness-wheel/>
- Georgetown Guide to Recognizing Students in Distress: <https://studentaffairs.georgetown.edu/studentoutreach/facultystaffresources/>

Pregnancy Modifications and Adjustments

Georgetown University is committed to creating an accessible and inclusive environment for pregnant students. At any point throughout their pregnancy students may request adjustments/modifications based on general pregnancy needs or accommodations based on a pregnancy-related complication or medical need. Students may also request accommodations following labor and delivery based on a complication or medical need.

To request pregnancy modifications, please complete the [SCS Pregnancy Modification Request Form](https://forms.gle/ZBfASxui7u13A8TU6): <https://forms.gle/ZBfASxui7u13A8TU6>

More information about pregnancy modifications can be found on the Title IX Georgetown University Website: <https://titleix.georgetown.edu/title-ix-pregnancy/student-pregnancy/>