

“The Letter from Prison in Christian History and Theology”

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The letter from prison is a long and variegated Christian literary tradition that reaches from the Apostle Paul to such twentieth-century figures as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Such letters are—at one level—extraordinarily dramatic documents of personal history, which may be addressed to government officials in protest; to religious communities in encouragement; to other prisoners in solidarity; or to parents, spouses, and children in consolation. But, however they were originally addressed, these personal documents have frequently been transformed into highly charged public declarations. Smuggled from behind prison walls, they are copied, printed, and widely circulated as affirmations of religious faith and enunciations of political protest. Published prison letters, in short, transmute the conventions of personal correspondence into acts of testimony, a bearing of witness by persons who believe themselves to be unjustly incarcerated for their fidelity to conscience and religious principle.

The English Reformation under Henry VIII initiated an extraordinary flowering of the letter from prison as a genre of English religious literature, as successive generations of dissidents refused to be incorporated within the changing boundaries of the officially established church. Notable early letters issued from the Tower of London in 1534 and 1535 bearing the signature of Sir Thomas More, and were followed, in the next century and a half, by hundreds of politically and theologically freighted prison epistles from both eminent and socially obscure men and women: Protestants during the reign of Mary Tudor; sectarians and Catholic priests during the reign of Elizabeth; democratic pamphleteers and religious visionaries during the English Civil Wars; and Roman Catholics, Quakers, and Baptists after the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy in

1660. By the end of the seventeenth century, nearly 3000 letters from prison had been printed and circulated as acts of conscience and political resistance.

The book I am writing will be a cultural and theological history of these English prison letters in the years from approximately 1530 to 1700. While attending to the specific historical contexts and purposes of individual letters, I will employ the concept of testimony to relate them to one another, to draw out their theological significance, and to situate them within the longer Christian literary tradition. As a group, the English prisoners were well aware of the literary lineage in which they wrote, and they traded on the authority of the epistolary form. They considered the New Testament letters to the Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon to have been written by Paul during imprisonment; they had studied the accounts of imprisonment and martyrdom in the Acts of the Apostles; and they took varied lessons from Revelation, as a visionary letter from exile during a time of persecution. Beyond the New Testament, a much larger orbit of prison writing encircled these English examples, and Ioan Davies has observed, in his book *Writers in Prison*, that much of the most influential literature of the West, from the Jewish and Christian scriptures to Plato's dialogues, reflected conditions of imprisonment or involuntary exile. "It is arguable," Davies writes, "that it is impossible to understand Occidental thought without recognizing the central significance of prison and banishment in its theoretical and literary composition."¹ My book explores this proposal with respect to the theoretical and literary composition of Christian theology.

During the 170 years of English history traversed in my book, the entire relationship of religion to the political and social orders was dramatically transformed. At the beginning of the era, the overwhelming consensus of English and European thought presumed that society could not survive and flourish without a common understanding of human nature, destiny, and conduct. It further assumed that the institution charged with inculcating this common understanding was the established church, whose rituals, doctrines, and moral

standards were protected by the force of the state. By the end of the seventeenth century, however, John Locke was enunciating a quite different idea of the church, which he saw as a voluntary association of like-minded individuals that, so long as it did not endanger the common welfare, ought to be free to pursue its beliefs, even its errors, in a climate of toleration. The intervening decades witnessed sharp disagreement concerning the true form of religion and the relations among competing versions of religious truth. The English prison letters figured prominently in this long contest over the place of religion in the public sphere. In the process, they played a crucial role in the debate over religious toleration during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and they addressed important, more strictly political issues, such as due legal process and freedom of the press.

In this commentary for the Web Forum on Religion and Culture, however, I want to step back from the shifting political and cultural contexts in which persons wrote letters from prison, in order to focus on some persistent features of the letter from prison as a literary form. To do so, I shall first introduce the concept of testimony, then suggest four points of view that we can adopt for interpreting the prison letter, and conclude by returning to the idea of testimony.

Testimony

The Yale literary theorist Shoshana Felman has defined our own era as "the age of testimony." Like other scholars who have thought about testimony, Felman begins her analysis with the term's legal context, a courtroom that requires testimony from witnesses because events are in doubt and the narrative connections among events are in question. Contending interests elaborate alternative interpretations from differing points of view, and a judge, a jury, an arbiter must make an appraisal and arrive at a decision. But Felman wishes to move beyond the contested narratives of a courtroom, in order to propose a second, and more fundamental sense in which ours is "the age of testimony."

The most searching testimonies of our era, she writes, "seem to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference." For her, the definitive, twentieth-century instance of an overwhelming event is the Holocaust. Testimony to occurrences "in excess of our frames of reference" shares the situated and perspectival features of testimony in general, but it also calls attention to a more general crisis of truth, in which traumatic events have so thoroughly disrupted the culturally received frames of reference that both the witness and those who hear the witness's story find themselves either without clear criteria of appraisal or with criteria that fail to assimilate and interpret crucial pieces of information.² The cultural courtroom is in ethical disarray.

English letters from prison during the early modern period dramatically embody the characteristics of courtroom testimony. They bear witness regarding contested events, and they make a claim on their readers to take responsibility for an appraisal of what is happening or has happened. The question of whether or not the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were an "age of testimony," in Felman's more radical sense of a crisis in the criteria by which witness is appraised, must await the detailed historical analysis of the book as a whole.

A letter of April 4 or 5, 1593, from the Elizabethan religious radical Henry Barrow to an anonymous, influential kinswoman (perhaps Anne Russell, Countess of Warwick³) nicely illustrates the principal features of such testimonial letters. At the time he wrote from London's Newgate Prison, Barrow had already been incarcerated for nearly six years. But now the situation had changed for the worse. On March 23, he and four colleagues—John Greenwood, Scipio Bellot, Robert Bowle, and Daniel Studley—had been condemned to death for writing, printing, and circulating books judged to be seditious and defamatory of the queen's majesty. These illegal books advanced the "Separatist" argument that

the Church of England was utterly corrupted in its manner of worship, ministry, governance, and membership, that it was, in short, a false church from which the faithful must flee into their separate congregations. Against this background and under the shadow of execution, on April 4 or 5, Barrow wrote his kinswoman, both to state his case and to request her aid.

Barrow opened his letter by contesting the official judgment that his imprisonment and condemnation were just punishment for seditious publications. On the contrary, Barrow argued, he was a devoted subject of the queen's government, suffering unjust persecution for conscientious objections he had raised against administration of the English church. Only through the "instigation" of vengeful prelates, resentful at "seeing the axe thus laid to the roots of the tree of their pomp," was he now "indicted, arraigned, condemned, and ready to be executed by the secular powers, for moving sedition." Such suffering for conscience incorporated him into the long lineage of religious suffering exemplified in the lives of Christ and the apostles, and he observed that it will be "no new or strange doctrine unto you, right honorable and excellent Lady," that in this life "the cross should be joined to the gospel." The twin notions that resolute adherence to Christian faith carried with it suffering for conscience and that suffering gave evidence of resolute faith had been classically enunciated by the great Henrician biblical translator William Tyndale in his *Obedience of a Christian Man* (1528). And this joining of cross and gospel had achieved dramatic form in John Foxe's voluminous narrative of English martyrs, *Acts and Monuments of these latter and perillous dayes* (1563), which the bishops themselves had directed to be made available in every cathedral church. Suffering for the true faith was "no new or strange doctrine" either to Barrow or to the countess.

But, Barrow continued, it might seem strange—indeed "almost incredible"—that in a professedly Christian land the church's own ministers should work "cruelty" on "the servants of Christ for the truth." The unlikelihood of such a thing, he admitted, made it difficult for "otherwise well affected" persons

not to presume that the prisoners were at fault. But, he countered, if the “true causes” of “our sufferings” were duly considered in relation to Scripture, “their malice and our innocence should easily appear to all men,” despite the fact that the bishops now sought to obscure the facts “by adding slander unto violence.” Due consideration of these facts would make clear that Christ and the apostles “suffered like usage under the same pretence of sedition.” The faithful of all ages have struggled and suffered in the long warfare between Christ and Antichrist, and Christ “shall not cease this war” until Antichrist is cast utterly from the church. Against the historical backdrop of this line of martyrs and witnesses to the truth, Barrow then rebutted the charges against him by insisting that his writings had consistently acknowledged “all duty and obedience to her majesty’s government, as to the sacred ordinance of God,” and had directed their polemic only against “this false ecclesiastical government.”

Following these scriptural justifications for his position, Barrow shifted the tenor of his letter by narrating the events of the days since his condemnation on March 23. On the morning immediately after the judgment, Barrow wrote, he and John Greenwood were brought up out of the Newgate dungeon, their irons removed, and they were “ready to be bound to the cart” for delivery to Tyburn’s scaffold, when the queen’s order of reprieve arrived. Seven days later, Barrow continued, he and Greenwood “were very early and secretly conveyed to the place of execution,” where, with the nooses around their necks, they were permitted to speak a few words to the crowd of onlookers. “We there, in the sight of that judge that knoweth and searcheth the heart, before whom we were thence immediately to appear, protested our loyalty and innocence towards her majesty . . . and this whole state.” They also “exhorted the people to obedience and hearty love of their prince and magistrates.” Just as they were concluding, once again came the queen’s reprieve. There was “exceeding rejoicing and applause of all the people, both at the place of execution and in the ways, streets, and houses, as we returned” to Newgate.

Having thus twice benefited from “her majesty’s princely clemency,” Barrow turned to his kinswoman. He hoped that “God shall move your noble heart, right virtuous lady,” and, “for the love and cause of Christ,” lead her to inform the queen that “our entire faith unto God, unstained loyalty to her highness, innocence and good conscience towards all men” made Barrow and Greenwood deserving of a pardon or, failing that, removal to a less onerous prison. This appeal from “the poor condemned prisoners of Christ” was not without its prophetic edge: “I hope I need not so much, as to stir up that good gift and grace of God which is in you, not to neglect or put from you this notable occasion sent unto you from God, to show forth the naturalness of your faith unto him, of your fidelity to your prince, of your love to the members of Christ in distress, whom as you succor or neglect herein, so assure yourself will Christ in his glory esteem it as done or denied to be done by you to his own sacred person.” With a final appeal to his kinswoman’s “diligent endeavor” and a declaration of God’s “mighty hand” in both life and death, he signed himself “condemned of men but received of God: Henry Barrow.”

Whether or not the letter reached its intended recipient, we do not know. Barrow and Greenwood were executed on April 6, 1593. Meanwhile, the letter itself circulated through the Separatist congregations and was published in anonymous and unauthorized tracts sometime between 1593 and 1595, in 1604, and again circa 1681.⁴

The Letter from Prison: Four Frames of Reference

The English letters from prison may be approached from a variety of perspectives, each of which yields somewhat different cultural and theological meanings. Employing the 1593 Barrow letter and selected other Tudor prison letters as illustrative reference points, let’s next explore prison letters in terms of politics, sociology, traditions of religious devotion, and the epistolary form itself. These approaches of course overlap, but distinguishing among them illuminates

both the violently clashing religious commitments and the richly textured religious meanings that adhere to this remarkable literary form. Furthermore, each perspective accentuates a different aspect of the general theological theme of testimony.

The Political Frame of Reference

Throughout the period from the 1530s to 1700, the prisoner faced the daunting political problem of making a persuasive case that incarceration had resulted from innocent acts of piety, which were not covert acts of sedition and public disruption. Compounding the difficulty of challenging the regnant assumption that directly connected religious deviance to political disruption, prison writers faced a second, practical difficulty: prison isolated religious dissenters in order to silence them. In its political frame of reference, the published letter from prison intended to circumvent this purpose by creating a counter-narrative that contested the official narrative. At one level, this counter-narrative identified the prisoner's plight with the grand drama of salvation history as a whole. Suffering for conscience incorporated the prisoner into the long lineage of religious suffering that, looking backward, was exemplified in the lives of Christ and the apostles, who suffered in the righteous battle against larger-than-life forces of evil. The faithful of all ages had struggled and suffered in the long warfare between Christ and Antichrist, and the present age was perhaps the culminating epoch of this cosmic conflict. Resolute witness to Christian faith thus carried with it suffering for conscience, and suffering gave evidence of resolute faith. This grand narrative had both its Protestant and its Catholic forms, and the struggle over the ramifications of differing interpretations will comprise an important theme of my book as a whole, but the presence of grand narrative, explicit or implied, was indispensable to the public function of the letter from prison.

At a second level, the prison letter spoke from personal knowledge of very specific events, providing a vivid description of the injustice, terror, and pain of

the prisoner's own incarceration. Henry Barrow's description of the two occasions on which he was prepared for an execution that was then delayed was one compelling illustration of a characteristic narrative strategy. Careful attention to detail gave verisimilitude to the letter's claim that it provided a true account that counteracted slander and misrepresentation issued by the ecclesiastical regime. The counter-narrative typically dramatized its denial of sedition and social disruption by contrasting official violence with the peaceful intentions and behavior of the prisoner.

The rhetorical power of the prison letter came from interweaving the prisoner's personal narrative with the grand narrative of Christian martyrdom, in order to incorporate the prisoner's tale in the historic testimony to the truth of the gospel. So, for example, the young Jesuit Alexander Briant, who would be executed along with Edmund Campion on December 1, 1581, wrote from the Tower of London to "the Reverend Fathers of the Society of Jesus." During his torture on the rack, he informed them, the thought fixed in his mind to "ratify" his vow to the society. Afterward, perhaps miraculously, "though my hands and feet were violently stretched," he found himself clear headed, without pain, and "in quietness of heart and tranquility of mind." Returned to his cell, Briant meditated on the suffering of Christ, and "me thought, that my left hand was wounded in the palm, and that I felt the blood run out: but in very deed, there was no such thing, nor any other pain that did grieve my hand."⁵ In letters such as Briant's, a "first-hand account" gave a singular, irreplaceable character to testimony, which no one other than the prisoner could deliver. Through the combination of grand narrative and particular narrative, the prisoner's suffering was represented as evidence of injustice, as certification of religious authenticity, and as an act of solidarity with community members under threat from the authorities. The letter aimed to align the prisoner's testimony with inexorable powers moving within history, the divine engines of providence and redemption. Frequently employing the Pauline trope of human weakness displaying divine power, the prisoner's

letter represented a voice of the powerless in the face of arbitrary power. As John Frith wrote from Newgate in the week before he was burned for heresy, why should one side have “all the words,” and “the other be put to silence?”⁶

The Social Frame of Reference

The prison writer who believed that he or she had been unjustly imprisoned for cause of conscience invariably made common cause with some wider group in the society. This community of solidarity might be as tiny as Henry Barrow’s Separatist conventicle or as expansive as the allegiance of the Leveller leader John Lilburne (1614?–1657) to the “free-born people of England.” Letters called on the community to maintain its commitments, despite the governmental actions that had led to the writer’s own imprisonment, and one of the most prominently recurring themes was the bond of personal affection and common loyalty to a cause that linked the prisoner to those beyond the cell. The bonds of solidarity also reached back to the prisoner, whose daily welfare depended on the community that sent letters; made visits; and provided food, clothing, and other physical needs. Without this tangible support, both the prisoner and the prisoner’s family could quickly fall into desperate straits, and such physical acts of consideration conveyed a more general sense of care that letters celebrated with gratitude.

Prisoners recognized the fragility of both the bonds of common cause and the bonds of common life. John Bradford wrote to his mother from the Tower of London in the autumn of 1553 to assure her that “I find God my most sweet good god always” in the chastising blessings of prison. Fearful that, confronted with persecution, his mother would lapse from his Protestant faith back into the traditional religion of her upbringing, Bradford wrote, “perchance you are infirmed and weakened of that which I have preached, because God doth not defend it (as you think) but suffereth the old popish doctrine to come again and prevail: but you must know, good mother, that God by this doth prove and try his children

and people whether they will unfainedly and simply hang on him and his word.”⁷ The visceral fear that his mother’s lapse would effectively deny the meaning of his life and preaching led Bradford to undergird fragile family solidarity on unfailing solidarity with Christ: “death nor life, prison nor pleasure (I trust in God) shall be able to separate me from my Lord God and his Gospel.” This poignant communication underscored one of the perennial features of testimony in all ages, namely, the responsibility of bearing solitary witness. “If someone else could have written my stories,” Elie Wiesel has written, “I would not have written them. I have written them in order to testify. And this is the origin of the loneliness that can be glimpsed in each of my sentences, in each of my silences.”⁸ The tensions between social solidarity and religious fidelity were never far below the surface of the prison writer, whose hours were alone with fate.

In its social aspect, the prison letter also bore witness to acts of representative suffering, undertaken in behalf of others, who were threatened not only by human adversaries but cosmic powers of evil and sin. In a letter of consolation from one prisoner to others, John Hooper encouraged prisoners in the Breadstreet Counter with the favor God showed them in their sufferings for conscience: they were “placed in the forefront of Christ’s battle . . . a sign that he trusteth you before others of his people. . . . Remember what lookers upon you have, to see and behold you in your fight: God and all his holy angels, who be ready always to take you up into heaven, if ye be slain in this fight. Also you have standing at your backs all the multitude of the faithful, who shall take courage, strength and desire, to follow such noble and valiant Christians, as you be.”⁹ Testimony, in this frame of reference, did not simply argue for a truth but persevered in exhibiting a way of life that would encourage “all the multitude of the faithful” to follow. It was precisely this sense of the witness’s representative solidarity that led the faithful to move near the pyre or the scaffold in order to hear and record the last words of the martyr. The ubiquitous feature of the woodcuts in Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments* was the pennant of pious text, issuing

from the mouth of the martyr consumed in flames for the truth, and Catholics and Protestants alike collected and preserved relics of their martyrs.

Unlike many recent writers from prison who are unsure of their readership and whose perception of audience “is frequently a shot in the dark at posterity,”¹⁰ the English prisoners for conscience were tightly moored and wrote out of a vivid image of the community beyond the cell. As a consequence, this literary act of solidarity had a pronounced tendency to distance or separate the prisoner from his or her fellow prisoners, who were presumably in jail because they belonged there. This sharp distinction was tellingly enunciated in interrogations conducted by the Bishop of London in 1567:

Dean of Westminster. ‘You are not obedient to the authority of the prince.’

William Wh. ‘Yes that we are: for we resist not, but suffer that the authority layeth upon us.’

Bishop. ‘So do thieves suffer, that the law layeth upon them.’

William Wh. ‘What a comparison is this? They suffer for evil doing, and you punish us for seeking to serve God according to his word.’¹¹

By contrast, in other historical settings, solidarity with one’s fellow prisoners has been represented as a moral and religious affirmation, which, in its literary and symbolic aspect, construes the prison as a microcosm of the wider society. In short, prison writing entails a social ethic, which can take different and sometimes contradictory forms.

The Devotional Frame of Reference

Prison has long served as a metaphor of life in the world and occasioned meditation on transience, fate, release from the bondage of sin, and the meaning of religious freedom. A common trope, for instance, is the notion that it is the prisoner who is becoming truly free, while those outside the walls remain

“chained” by fear, by social conformity, or by hypocrisy. The English prisoners for conscience stood squarely within this meditative tradition. The physical space of the prison, the suffering endured there, and the seemingly minor occurrences of daily existence acquired symbolic force in their writing, which represented the prison as a preeminent place of moral discernment, including self-discernment. The prison letter, in other words, is an important, if neglected, genre of Christian spirituality.

Among the many salient meditative themes of the English prison letters, perhaps the most important—as well as the most ambiguous—was the prisoner’s quest for the virtue of humility. On the one hand, the rhetoric of humility fit squarely within the aristocratic hierarchies of early modern society. Thus, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer wrote to Queen Mary from the Oxford prison, “I submit myself most humbly unto your majesty, acknowledging mine offence with most grievous and sorrowful heart, and beseeching your mercy and pardon.”¹² On the other hand, humility was a theological virtue, and in this rhetorical context carried quite different implications. Humility was thought to regulate the whole of the virtuous life by submitting it to the true order of being, in which the person accepted the fact that existence and human good were dependent on God. Humility entailed the prisoner’s arrival at the fateful judgment that human resistance had accomplished all that it could, that life was now entirely in God’s hands, and that the final hours of existence should not be consumed by anger toward oppressors or despair at one’s fate. Humility thus opened the self to the infinite, and its opposites were pride, independence, and self-sufficiency. Throughout the epoch, distinguishing between the act of submitting to the authorities and the act of submitting to the invincible will of God proved central to the prison meditation.

When William Allen, in exile at Rheims, collected and published information about the martyrdom of Elizabethan Catholics, he included a letter by Ralph Sherwin, who was executed for treason in 1581, along with Briant and

Campion. Although Sherwin consistently resisted the efforts of authorities to extract information or recantation, his farewell letter from the Tower to friends was a model of humble self-composition before God, in preparation for death: “truth it is I hoped ere this, casting off this body of death, to have kissed the precious glorified wounds of my sweet Savior, sitting in the throne of his Father’s own glory. Which desire, as I trust descending from above, hath so quieted my mind that since the judicial sentence proceeded against us, neither the sharpness of the death hath much terrified me, nor the shortness of life much troubled me. . . . God grant us humility, that we following his footsteps may obtain the victory.”¹³

John Hooper invoked this theological dimension of humility in a letter of exhortation to the Breadstreet Counter prisoners. When the shepherds were visited by the angels and left to see Christ in Bethlehem, said Hooper, “they did not reason, nor debate with themselves, who should keep the wolf from the sheep in the meantime, but did as they were commanded . . . So let us do now we be called, commit all other things unto him that calleth us. He will take heed that all things shall be well. He will help the husband, he will comfort the wife, he will guide the servants, he will keep the house, he will preserve the goods; yea, rather than it should be undone, he will wash the dishes, and rock the cradle. Cast therefore all your care upon God, for he careth for you.”¹⁴

The Epistolary Frame of Reference

The epistolary form itself had three theologically significant features for English prison writers. First, it symbolized the theme of solidarity by connoting a material link between the writer and the recipient, despite the physical separation created by imprisonment. This was, of course, literally the case with the original letter, as when Lady Jane Grey—ever so briefly Queen of England through the ill-fated plot of the Duke of Nothumberland—shortly before her execution in 1554 inscribed a letter in the back of her Greek New Testament to her younger sister,

Katherine. “Although it be not outwardly trimmed with gold,” she wrote in the testament, “yet inwardly it is more worth then precious stones. . . . and if you with a good mind read it, and with an earnest mind do follow it, it shall bring you to an immortal and everlasting life. It will teach you to live, and learn you to die.”¹⁵ The prisoner was made present through her letter, and, when prison letters were printed, the physical appearance of the text sought to communicate this epistolary quality, with salutation, date, place of writing, and signature quite frequently set off in distinctive type to symbolize the personal “hand” of the writer. As the editor of letters by Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer explained, “forasmuch as these their scrolls and writings were by God’s good providence preserved, and as it were, raised out of the ashes of the authors,” they can perpetuate the ministry of their authors, and “as in life, they profited thee by teaching, and in death by example, so after death, they may do thee good by writing.”¹⁶

Second, the letter was believed to convey the character of its author in a manner that other types of writing could not accomplish. Thus, when Miles Coverdale collected and published letters of the Marian martyrs, he introduced them by approving quotation of an observation from Erasmus that, whereas in Augustine’s many writings one may learn aspects of his life and thought, in Augustine’s letters “thou shalt know whole Augustine altogether.” These letters, said Coverdale, show “ye blessed behavior of God’s dear servants . . . yea what the very thoughts of their hearts were,” in prayer or when visited by the hand of God.¹⁷ In short, the letter bore witness to religious truth not simply as doctrine, nor even as personal experience, but as an entire theologically informed way of life, and it did so through a literary medium that underscored the first person singular.

Third, the letter from prison, precisely by being a letter, shaped the cultural meaning of theological ideas by organizing these ideas within a literary form of direct address to the reader. The prison letter tacitly claimed a “reply,” a decision,

from the recipient, who had received an embodied and personalized theological message. Nicholas Ridley's letter of farewell thus counseled his extended family not to be "amazed" at the manner of his death. He himself gave thanks that God had chosen him, "a sinful and vile wretch . . . unto this high dignity of his true prophets, of his faithful apostles, and of his holy elect and chosen martyrs, that is to die and to spend this temporal life in the defence and maintenance of his eternal and everlasting truth."¹⁸

Testimony of the Absolute

When a prisoner such as Nicholas Ridley presented his or her suffering as the literal embodiment of the truth of Christianity, the prison letter became an instance of what philosopher Paul Ricoeur has called "testimony of the Absolute." That is, the letter did not call on its recipient simply to decide about the facts of a particular case or the justice of an individual jail sentence. More than that, the letter called the reader to decide whether or not this prisoner's particular tale of being persecuted because of faithfulness, in fact, revealed the truest meaning of life and thus placed an absolute religious claim on the faith and conduct of the reader. Ricoeur usefully distinguishes between testimony as act and testimony as narrative. Testimony is first rendered by real acts of devotion up to death. But this testimony evokes a second testimony, in which a person bears narrative witness to the witness that she or he has seen. Ricoeur draws a sharp distinction, one might say, between the witness as martyr and the witness as observer. A witness gives a sign, perhaps without knowing or intending to do so. Another person gives narrative interpretation of this sign as "testimony of the Absolute."¹⁹ Much of the rhetorical power, as well as much of the moral and theological ambiguity, of the letter from prison lies in the form's tendency to collapse these two "movements" within testimony of the Absolute.

This tendency is particularly evident in the idea that the prisoner who is about to die spoke with a singularly dispassionate voice that penetrated to the

true state of affairs. As we have seen, Henry Barrow's 1593 prison letter provided a particularly dramatic representation of this idea by reporting what Barrow thought was his final speech on the scaffold, before learning that the queen had delivered a reprieve. Just as some persons today might build religious claims on a near-death experience, so Barrow could build on a near-death oration. Even though Barrow began his letter with a fully interested—even biased—account of contested narratives between him and the authorities, the rhetoric of the scaffold raised his speech beyond the political fray. Facing death, the prisoner spoke in the disinterested and fully truthful way that would satisfy the eternal judge who searched hearts for their hidden motives. In effect, this introduced God as Ricoeur's second, observing and narrating witness in the "testimony of the Absolute." In the way that one might colloquially say, "as God is my witness," Barrow wrote the Observer into his own narrative of witness. The letter's reader faced the decision of whether God was present on the scaffold as eternal witness for Barrow.

Conclusion

As political, devotional, and social documents the English prison letters used the epistolary form to make a powerful claim for the prisoner's physical embodiment of Christian life and truth. Doctrine and theological reflection were paramount throughout these writings, but theology was never abstracted into a system. Instead, these documents were instances of what today might be called practical theology, the use of religious thought to interpret the concrete challenges, aspirations, and inevitabilities of human life. This aspect of theology—its full participation in the claims and contests of a culture—suggests the fruitfulness of the prison letter for exploring not so much "theology of culture" as "theology in culture." The dramatic qualities of both the letters themselves and the conditions under which they were produced make these documents singularly useful case studies in the role that religious ideas and commitments play—for good and for

ill—in social history. As a body of literature, the letters from prison represent a crucial intersection between the artistry of religion as a cultural form and the power of religion as a social institution.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Ioan Davies, *Writers in Prison* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 3.

² Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 5-6.

³ Henry Ainsworth and Francis Johnson, *An Apologie or Defence of Such True Christians as are commonly (but unjustly) called Brownists* (n.p., 1604), 89-95. I have modernized the spelling and capitalization in this and the other sixteenth-century documents cited in this commentary. I am happy to acknowledge that quotation from primary sources is by courtesy of the Burke Library of Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York. A modern edition of the letter appears in Leland H. Carlson, ed., *The Writings of John Greenwood and Henry Barrow, 1591-1593*, Elizabethan Nonconformist Texts, vol. 6 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970), 242-252. Carlson's argument that the letter was intended for the Countess of Warwick appears on 238-242.

⁴ Ainsworth and Johnson, *An Apologie; The Examinations Of Henry Barrow, John Greenwood, and John Penry, before the High Commissioners and Lords of the Council* (London: for William Marshall, [1681?]).

⁵ *An Epistle of the Persecution of Catholickes in Englande* [1582], n.p.

⁶ John Frith, *A booke made by John Fryth prysoner in the Tower of London* ([London]: by Richard Jugge, 1548), 103 verso.

⁷ Miles Coverdale, ed., *Certain most godly, fruitful, and comfortable letters of such true Saintes and holy Martyrs of God, as in the late bloodye persecution here within this Realme, gave their lyves for the defence of Christs holy gospel* (London: by John Day, 1564), 291.

⁸ Cited in Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 3.

⁹ John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments of these latter and perillous dayes* (London: by John Day, 1563), 1021.

¹⁰ Davies, *Writers in Prison*, 49.

¹¹ *A parte of a register, conteyning sundrie memorable matters, written by divers godly and learned in our time* [n.p., 1590 or 1593?], 27.

¹² Coverdale, *Certain most godly . . . letters*, 2.

¹³ [William Allen], *A Briefe Historie of the Glorious Martyrdom of Twelve Reverend Priests*, ed., J. H. Pollen (London: Burns and Oates, 1908), 41-42.

¹⁴ Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 1021-1022.

¹⁵ Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 918.

¹⁶ Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer, *Certein godly, learned, and comfortable confernces betwene the two Reverende Fathers, and holy martyrs of Christe, D. Nicholas Rydley late Bisshoppe of London, and M. Hugh Latimer, sometyme Bisshop of Worcester, during the tyme of their emprisonmentes* (n.p., 1556), a1 verso – a2 recto.

¹⁷ Coverdale, *Certain most godly . . . letters*, n.p., the preface.

¹⁸ Coverdale, *Certain most godly . . . letters*, 82-83.

¹⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 117.