BOOK REVIEW

Bloodiest, and most powerful, of books

Martyrs Mirror has shaped the Anabaptist tradition more powerfully than any book besides the Bible. That is the premise of David L. Weaver-Zercher’s masterful new history of Thieleman J. van Braght’s classic 17th-century text, an account of Christian martyrdom from the Roman Empire through the Reformation.

From its inception in the Dutch Republic, through its translation in colonial America, to its current status as a global icon of suffering faith, Weaver-Zercher reveals the strange, fascinating story of this bloodiest of books. Martyrs Mirror holds a diverse legacy among present-day Anabaptists. In some conservative and Old Order households, it provides a beloved devotional text. Parents recount beatings, drownings and burnings to their children as a guide for maintaining religious distinctiveness in a secular world.

Among progressives, Martyrs Mirror likely represents a symbolic relic of an ethnic past. While a copy stood on my childhood shelf, the Mennonites I grew up with were more likely to learn of our murdered “ancestors” in storybooks or Sunday school lessons than through van Braght’s archaic prose.

Why has this dense and gruesome tome — or at least its name and message — retained such prominence? In a lucid and authoritative voice, frequently cut with wit, Weaver-Zercher provides the theological, social and economic contexts — mostly Dutch and American — that have enabled myriad printings, reprints, translations, excisions and offshoots. We learn that The Bloody Theater, as van Braght originally titled it, was never a simple chronicle but that editors and publishers intended new editions to serve personal interests, often with regard to church controversies of the day.

If historians place Martyrs Mirror at the pinnacle of Anabaptism’s martyrological tradition, this is because it followed — and borrowed liberally from — a vast literature of older martyr books and death ballads, including works by both Catholics and Protestants. Unlike his Reformation-era predecessors, however, van Braght wrote at a time of comparative tolerance and affluence. Earlier martyrologies had appeared without publication data (to protect printers) and were so small they could be hidden beneath a cloak. Martyrs Mirror was ornate, expensive and physically massive.

Like its subject material, Weaver-Zercher’s book is both ambitious and impressive. It constitutes an overview-in-miniature of Anabaptist history. If you have ever wondered why a particular group broke off from another or why a conference developed as it did, there is a good chance Martyrs Mirror played a role.

Weaver-Zercher shows, for example, how in 1749 Mennonites on the American frontier addressed pressures from British warmakers and pietist evangelists with the first German-language edition. A century later, progressives in Indiana released an English translation, which in turn provided fodder for the distinction between “Old” Mennonites and General Conference Mennonites. During the Second World War, conscientious objection helped popularize Dirk Willems as the “most useable martyr.” And today, translations in more than a dozen languages serve congregations across the globe.

What unites these diverse moments, Weaver-Zercher argues, is the fact that martyrology mattered. At every turn, “Martyrs Mirror” has functioned, and continues to function, as a measure of Christian faithfulness,” he writes. Van Braght’s book has proven enduring, in part, because of his emphasis on “apocalyptic succession” — the idea that a small group of believers preserved the true gospel (characterized by nonresistance and adult baptism) in an unbroken line since the days of Christ. Thus, whoever claims ownership over Martyrs Mirror can also portray themselves as Jesus’ rightful heirs. Put differently, martyr tales are always about power, especially the power to induce social and theological conformity.

Weaver-Zercher mostly limits his discussion of martyrology’s dark side to a concluding section on 21st-century interpretations. Such sowing is perhaps his book’s greatest limitation. While it speaks brilliantly to the reasons why male church leaders promoted their blood-spattered narratives, only rarely does Weaver-Zercher explore how their words operated to police congregants’ behavior in the pew, farmyard or bedroom. The voices of women, in particular — whose demeanor, appearance and piety undoubtedly supplied a major target of martyr sermons and marital reprimands — are underrepresented.

Weaver-Zercher assesses the significance of profit motives. Promoters of Martyrs Mirror were a motley bunch, from the apocalyptic celibatarian Conrad Beissel to Amish layman and stream baptism enthusiast Shem Zook. They were often also savvy businessmen. In 1665, not Mennonites but wealthy Calvinists bankrolled the book’s influential second edition, including the famous 104 copper plates etched by artist Jan Luyken. During the 20th century, similarly, Pennsylvania’s Mennonite Publishing House proclaimed its willingness to sell copies below cost but privately pushed retailers for “a proper margin.”

If we broaden our scope, considering the context of the print revolution as well as imperial expansion since the Dutch Golden Age, the story of Martyrs Mirror becomes inextricably bound with the rise of global capitalism. Van Braght sacrificed his time and health — dying at age 39 — to compile a polemic against the “lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye and the pride of life” enabled by the “shameful and vast commerce which extends far beyond the sea.” Yet the martyrologist simultaneously courted a market of nouveau riche consumers, flush with the wages of mercantilism and the spoils of slavery. Absent the Netherlands’ colonial plunder of Africa and the East and West Indies, Martyrs Mirror might never have been written.

What role, if any, should martyrology play for Anabaptists today? Can tales of sacrificial suffering speak to those of us who, like many Mennonites of van Braght’s era, live rich and privileged lives? What about the majority of Anabaptists worldwide who are people of color, reside in the Global South and sometimes experience persecution akin to the ravages of the Reformation? Weaver-Zercher’s book is the invaluable latest entry in this ongoing and highly contested debate. Just as some ministers recommend that van Braght’s text grace every household, Martyrs Mirror: A Social History belongs in the repertoire of all historically minded Anabaptists, a mirror from our troubled past onto this uncertain present.

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MARTYRS MIRROR: A SOCIAL HISTORY

By David L. Weaver-Zercher
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Reviewed by Ben Goossen

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