few years ago, I finished a book on the cultural memory of early Christian martyrdom. In the epilogue to this book, I explored in broad strokes the deep ambivalences that circulate around the figure of “the martyr,” a figure who simultaneously inspires awe and reverence, anxiety and suspicion. As I have spoken about the book in various contexts—academic lectures and conferences, readings at churches and bookstores—I have been fascinated by the ethical turn of many of the responses I have received, for there has hardly been an occasion when I have spoken about the book that the topic of contemporary suicide bombers has not come up, usually framed by the question, “Are these people really martyrs?” The barely veiled wish here is that I, an “expert” on martyrdom, will declare suicide bombers not really martyrs and that my declaration will somehow magically rebuild the clear boundaries between true and false martyrs and thereby restore some sanctity to the category of “martyr” itself. My now-routine response—that the designation “martyr” is not an ontological category but a post-event interpretive one, that martyrs are produced by the stories told about them—seems to fall short of satisfying the wish for a sacrosanct ideal, devoid of ambivalence. But what interests me most about the longing for such an ideal and the desire for clear-eyed distinctions between true and false martyrs is that these wishes reflect a deep recognition of the religious, cultural, and political power of the figure of “the martyr” itself. If martyrs are objects of reverence, models for emulation, ideals against which to measure one’s own commitments, they are also embodiments of compulsion and absolutism. Their incarnation of utter, unwavering conviction inspires desire for certainty: the certainty that they enact, but also certainty about their character and status.

Here, in the early years of the twenty-first century, one cannot help but notice how centrally the figure of the martyr has emerged on the global stage—not only as a mythic frame for embodied acts of political insurrection and terror but also as a story that the state tells about the casualties of its militarism, growing numbers of dead soldiers eulogized as actors in one noble
gesture after another of willing self-sacrifice, martyrs to an abstraction—the nation, freedom, our way of life. The martyr story thereby becomes an authoritative ground for political argument, and because of the excess and absoluteness of the story itself (“paying the ultimate price,” “giving one’s very life for the cause”), it makes a powerful and irresistible claim upon its hearers, edging out competing stories and alternative arguments. Indeed, the symbolic power of the martyr often exceeds argument itself and can thereby short-circuit disputation and debate. The martyr stands as an irreducible embodiment of an unassailable truth, the seamless incarnation of the idea.

In our current geopolitical moment, martyrs increasingly emerge as extreme and literal embodiments of political expression, as the irrefutable means for articulating absolute claims about sovereignty and justice. Culture does the work of translation here, rendering the martyrological act legible and intelligible. But our current moment is hardly the first in which the mythography of martyrdom has performed political work. We likely cannot get to the bottom of the martyr story in any meaningful way, but we can see how it performs its work in and through a wide range of cultural forms and ask questions about the ongoing effects of that work in different times and places. Because my training is in the history of the Christian tradition and because the martyr story is so central to Christian self-understanding and formation, I focus on the political and cultural work that early Christian martyrdom does in recent Anglo-American cultural history—in literature, film, and iconographic citation.

What I want to explore in this essay are some fragments of the recent genealogy of this kind of political expression. In particular, I am interested in moments when the idealized figure of early Christian martyrdom comes to be leveraged in popular and mass culture media in the service of claims about contemporary political struggles. This genealogy is dialectical in nature, moving back and forth between antiquity and its diverse legacies, on the one hand, and contemporary political debates and their efforts to reach backwards in time to find authorizing grounds, on the other. Indeed, the figure of “early Christian martyrdom” time travels fluidly in the space in-between, resisting temporal fixing or even historical contextualization, refracting contemporary political circumstances through a prism of renarration. This process is what I am calling, “using early Christian martyrs to think with.”

In her 2003 article, “Ancient Egyptian Religion on the Silver Screen: Modern Anxieties about Race, Ethnicity, and Religion,” Caroline Schroeder shows how mass culture representations of antiquity often serve contemporary cultural and political ends. In particular, Schroeder argues that the films she discusses each “use religion and race or ethnicity to naturalize Western ideals—e.g., democracy, science, ‘Judeo-Christian’ monotheism—at the expense of an ethnic ‘other.’” These films—“The Mummy,” “The Ten Commandments,”
“Stargate,” and “The Prince of Egypt”—all work in citational mode, iconologically. That is, they evoke what viewers purportedly already “know” about ancient Egypt and recirculate that knowledge through an altogether different cultural project organized around contemporary political concerns in the United States Schroeder’s discussion invites its readers to consider how mass culture negotiates, blurs, and sometimes dissolves the boundaries between modernity and antiquity and thereby uses antiquity as a tool for producing a culturally and politically coherent present.

If ancient Egypt has been the staging ground, as Schroeder has argued, for mass culture’s construction of Western selfhood in contrast to a manufactured Oriental otherness, the Roman Empire and the place of early Christians within it have performed analogous but distinct ideological work in the modern age. Inviting a range of political and cultural identifications and misidentifications, popular and mass culture have frequently “used early Christian martyrs to think with” in the service of a range of political critiques. In this essay, I want to explore some of the dimensions of this ideological work through an examination of three different Anglo-American examples drawn from literature, film, and journalistic photography in the twentieth century. In examining these artifacts, I am particularly interested in their iconic logic, how they cite both “antiquity” and subsequent citations and representations of antiquity, weaving an iconographically remembered past into the political concerns of the present.

**NAOMI MITCHISON, THE BLOOD OF THE MARTYRS (1939)**

In 1939, Scottish socialist and feminist Naomi Mitchison published an historical novel entitled *The Blood of the Martyrs.* The novel is set in Nero’s Rome against a backdrop of Roman imperialism, political overreaching, and moral corruption, and paints in easily legible strokes a broad political and historical allegory: Nero’s brutal persecution of the early Christians in the wake of the fire in Rome in the first century parallels Hitler’s pitiless persecution of the Jews in the wake of the burning of the Reichstag in the twentieth. The first-century Christians of Mitchison’s imagination are simple slaves and freedmen devoted to a morally uncomplicated communitarian socialism, an egalitarian kingdom of God on earth. (Strikingly, they have little to no concern for matters of immortality and, indeed, Paul’s cameo appearances in the novel serve largely as occasions for other Christian characters to chastise him for obscuring the simple and straightforward Christian message with his obscurantist mystical preaching about the afterlife.) The persecutors of the Christians, meanwhile, are power-hungry fascists who seek to impose and maintain a rigidly hierarchical social order by deploying brutal violence. Through this apparently straightforward allegory, Mitchison, who had a strong and abiding interest in historical fiction as a genre particularly well-suited to the project of cultural critique,
sought to offer an accessible narrative argument about the rise of European fascism, effectively using early Christian martyrs to think with.

Upon its publication, just shortly before Britain’s declaration of war on Germany in September 1939, the book received mixed reviews: the Manchester Guardian proclaimed that “Mrs. Mitchison has no superior in the historical novelists’ art of recreating the past,” and the Christian World’s reviewer praised the novel with the words, “the whole political, social and religious life of the time is described with fine historical imagination based on careful study.” On the other hand, the influential New Statesman rather mordantly compared Mitchison’s Christian characters to “a Fabian summer school captured by white slavers.” Subsequent critics have sought to evaluate the relative literary merit of the book, some praising Mitchison’s knowing and subversive appropriation of the genre of the historical novel, others criticizing her particular execution of the project as a merely reductionist “parable of the present,” to use the phrase Gyorgy Lukács invented in the 1930s to disparage historical novels that were in his view insufficiently dialectical in their negotiation of the tension between the politics of the present and the narrative texture of the past.

My interest in this novel, however, is not primarily literary or aesthetic. I am interested, rather, in the cultural work that a novel like this one can do to mobilize Christian antiquity in the service of contemporary political debates. In our own day, many of us may cringe at the powerful influence of popular culture recirculations of early Christian stories and texts—from Mel Gibson’s notorious “The Passion of the Christ” to Dan Brown’s blockbuster novel, The DaVinci Code, and Tim LaHaye’s and Jerry Jenkins’s multivolume Left Behind series. But a more historically engaged question is to consider why these uses of early Christian stories and texts have such a power to persuade, and to look at other occasions when such stories performed rather different political work.

As for Mitchison, she signals the double character of her project in The Blood of the Martyrs from the very first page of the book, in its dedication. “Books are never written only and entirely by their authors,” she begins. “There are always others who have helped to shape them. It will be obvious that this book could not have been written, or, with the same plot, would have been written very differently, a few years ago. Events shaped it, as they have shaped all of us and our works.” After thanking other writers and several historians and friends, Mitchison expands her circle of gratitude still further:

> And beyond and behind these known and certain and consciously collaborating individuals, there are other men and women whose names I may not even know; but my thought and imagination fashions and chooses and eliminates because of our mutual participation in events. There are Austrian socialists in the counter-revolution of 1934, sharecroppers in Arkansas in 1935, old friends in King’s
By her own account in this dedication, Mitchison links her surface narrative—the story of Nero’s Rome and the martyrdom of early Christians—to contemporary political circumstances of Europe and beyond. Against “tyranny and superstition and the worship of the State” she positions “humanity and reason and kindliness” and a progressive, utopian vision of building “the Kingdom which we all want in our hearts.” The early Christians of Mitchison’s narrative are analogies for an eclectic grouping of disparate communities in Mitchison’s own time, all linked by a broadly inclusive bond of solidarity: Austrian socialist dissidents, to whom Mitchison herself had lent aid in the early 1930s, the landless and dispossessed of the American south, and “the named and unnamed host of witnesses” who have and will fall victim to Fascist domination.

The plot of *The Blood of the Martyrs* is in many ways predictable, although there are important elements of the book that invite closer reflection. As other commentators have observed, *The Blood of the Martyrs* is an unlikely English historical novel because, although it is set in the Roman Empire, it takes the side not of the empire but of its victims. Numerous literary historians have situated the book within a trajectory of historical fiction that traditionally has invited its readers to identify with and align themselves with the powers of empire; such books were part of Mitchison’s wide and eclectic reading as a girl. These include Thomas Babington Macaulay’s *Lays of Ancient Rome* (1849), Rudyard Kipling’s *Puck of Pook’s Hill* (1906), Charles Kingsley’s *Hypatia* (1853), George Whyte-Melville’s *The Gladiators* (1863), George Alfred Henty’s *Beric the Briton* (1892). But whereas the standard education for upper-class British boys succeeded in turning them into what one commentator has called “complacent Caesar-nurtured imperialists,”14 Mitchison, who was treated to a girl’s rather more haphazard education at home from the age of twelve, found herself reading resistantly and against the political grain of many of these texts. As Mitchison herself expressed it in a self-aware essay entitled, “Notes on Books and One’s Funny Ideas of Ancient History,” published in 1924: “Not unnaturally one always used to take sides with the barbarians against Rome.”15 Indeed, Mitchison took sides with the barbarians early on in her writing life when she published her first novel, *The Conquered*, in 1923 at the age of 25.16 Its epigraph was, *Victrix causa diis placuit sed victa puellis* [“The victorious cause is pleasing to the gods, but the conquered cause is
pleasing to girls”]. Setting an allegorical pattern for The Blood of the Martyrs sixteen years later, The Conquered refracted the sufferings of the Irish at the hands of the English through a Roman-era story focused on the deleterious effects of Roman imperialism on the peoples of Gaul.

The Blood of the Martyrs might also be placed, though more tentatively, in some literary historical relationship to the many pious historical novels written in the nineteenth century about early Christianity, a genre dominated by women authors. Most of these novels were concerned with conversion to a decidedly Protestant version of Christianity; and, although enjoying significant popularity, they were not without their critics. As one literary historian observes, in a review of one such work of fiction, George Eliot acerbically “attacked the whole ‘modern-antique’ genre of silly novels by lady novelists, ‘adorned with that peculiar style of grandiloquence which is held by some lady novelists to give an antique colouring,’ in which the heroes and their friends ‘are converted to Christianity after the shortest and easiest method approved by the ‘Society for Promoting the Conversion of the Jews.”’¹⁷

But Mitchison’s novel, however it might idealize the early Christian movement in first-century Rome, was not concerned with religious conversion but rather with political awakening. Throughout the novel, the early Christians who will suffer martyrdom at the end of the story are a synecdoche for those who suffer oppression and those who stand in solidarity against it. This politically embedded and utopian project comes into view at strategic points throughout the book. Although The Blood of the Martyrs could be read as a straightforward historical novel, its author made a series of critical framing decisions that invites a different and more allegorical reading, one inflected through her distinctive socialist vision of a possible but as-yet-unrealized world. In addition to the dedication, which situates the book within the context of the immediate historical situation and positions its author in solidarity with anti-fascist socialist dissenters and other victims of tyranny, the book’s structure is itself marked throughout by interpretive guideposts that make it clear that the novel is not simply a book about first-century Rome. Part Two, for example, begins with a martyrological epigraph drawn from the socialist poetry of William Morris.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the epigraph for Part Three establishes a genealogy that implicitly links first-century Christian martyrs with the political radicals who have fallen victim to state-sponsored violence in the twentieth century. Specifically, this epigraph derives from the famous quotation that was attributed by a sympathetic journalist to Bartolomeo Vanzetti (of the anarchist pair, Sacco and Vanzetti) upon his condemnation to death in 1927. The epigraph reads: “[If it had not been for this thing,] I might have lived out my life talking at street corners to scorning men. I might have died, unmarked, unknown, a failure. Now we are not a failure. This is our
career and our triumph. Never in our full life can we hope to do such work for
tolerance, justice, for man’s understanding of man, as now we do by accident.
Our words—our lives—our pains—nothing! The taking of our lives—lives of a
good shoemaker and a poor fish peddler—all! That last moment belongs to
us—that agony is our triumph.” Chapter headings, meanwhile,
anachronistically weave the political language of 1930s socialist activism into
the narrative framework of first-century Rome so that the chapters bear titles
such as, “The Comrades,” “The Bosses,” “Ends and Means,” “The Individual
and the State,” “The Difficulties of a United Front.”

Mitchison’s political critique is also visible in her characterizations and the
dialogue she invented for her narrative. Mitchison’s first-century Rome is
governed by a megalomaniacal, second-rate artist, the emperor Nero, clearly
patterned on a more contemporary version of the same type—Hitler. In her
portraiture, Nero speaks a fascist dialect: “Strength through joy!” he declaims
at one point, and at another:

I feel like a god . . . sometimes. Coming into the Arena, slowly, grandly, at the head
of the great procession serpent-stretching behind me, lifted on the voices, the
closing, rising cheers, the love, lifted above the sand that is so soon to take the
blood. . . . I am the Will of Rome and the people know it, the ordinary people who

Obscured Messages: Kiosk in Sun #1. © Mark Howell.

Castelli | The Ambivalent Legacy of Violence and Victimhood
love me. For whom I make the blood sacrifices. You said they loved me! It is only hideous old men, the Senators, who refuse to know that I am the Will. Some day I shall make them. I have been merciful, but my patience will not endure everything. Heads will roll! If they thwart me, they thwart the Will and Voice of Rome, isn’t that right?20

This fluid movement back and forth between the first-century narrative context and the twentieth-century site of enunciation can be jarring to a reader who approaches the novel with a strong desire for simple historical verisimilitude. Yet, this interruption of temporality seems to be part of the design of Mitchison’s project. Indeed, The Blood of the Martyrs is built upon such anachronistic juxtapositions, the language of one historical situation superimposed upon another, the story of ancient tyranny and religious persecution mapped onto 1930s Europe. The work of analogy and allegory here depends upon identifications and disidentifications—the reader is called to align herself with the progressive, egalitarian, and solidarity-steeped early Christians of the narrative and thereby with the oppressed and dispossessed of her own time and place. Defying the long tradition whereby English historical fiction used Roman imperialism “to think British national identity with,” Mitchison uses a conventional genre toward politically progressive ends. That is, rather than merely producing a “parable of the present,” as one of her critics would suggest she has done, instead she has produced a complicated narrative and historical echo by playing antiquity and her current political moment off of each other—her “funny ideas about ancient history” producing an alternative vision of and for the present.

The book’s reception and influence were most certainly eclipsed by the overwhelming historical events that occurred so soon after its publication: the invasion of Poland, Britain’s declaration of war on Germany, the beginning of World War II. Beyond the mixed literary reviews, there is little evidence that Mitchison’s allegorical critique and utopian vision as she articulated them in The Blood of the Martyrs made a lasting impact on the events of her time. But this fact should not obscure her attempt to make a politically engaged cultural intervention, combining the genre of historical fiction as the medium and the legacy of early Christian martyrdom as the figure for her anti-fascist politics. Such an effort places her not only in the trajectory of historical fiction writers who have used the Roman empire as backdrop and imaginative setting, but also in the lineage of cultural workers have made early Christian martyrs stand in for their own strongly held values and convictions.

**MGM’S QUO VADIS (1951)**

Mitchison’s Blood of the Martyrs and its dialectical allegory about the rise of European fascism and the potential for resistance can be placed, as I have
already observed, in various literary historical trajectories. Perhaps the most significant one comprises the numerous important nineteenth-century historical novels about the interactions of the Roman Empire with its subject populations, including the exceptionally popular *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880) by Lew Wallace and *Quo Vadis* (1895) by Polish novelist and Nobel laureate for literature, Henryk Sienkiewicz. These two novels were probably the most important and influential of this genre as it emerged from the nineteenth century. Their spectacular characters lent themselves quite enthusiastically to the emergent technology of filmmaking, and both novels were repeatedly adapted as moving pictures in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Both novels were also transformed into cinematic epics in Hollywood in the 1950s for mass audiences, making a transition from the more antiquated genre of historical novel into the modern post-war genre of Hollywood spectacle. It is to this mass culture interpretation of early Christianity that I now wish to turn, specifically the American film version of *Quo Vadis*, directed by Mervyn LeRoy (the producer of *The Wizard of Oz*) and released by Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer in 1951.

MGM’s *Quo Vadis* was the fourth film version of Henryk Sienkiewicz’s 1895 novel. The earlier efforts included the 1901 Pathé Studios [Paris] version, consisting of a series of tableaux vivants; the 1913 version directed by Enrico Guazzoni and produced by Cines Film Company in Rome; the 1924 collaboration of Gabriele d’Annunzio and Georg Jacoby, during the rise of fascism in Italy. After the appearance of the American blockbuster in 1951, all was quiet on the *Quo Vadis* front until RAI produced a miniseries for Italian television in 1985. The most recent adaptation is a 2001 Polish feature film.

Watching the 1951 *Quo Vadis* today, a half-century after its release, one is in for a viewing experience that is part-camp and part-cliché. That said, it is nevertheless the case that the film, which was marketed in 1951 and 1952 as “the big one” and also as “not suitable for children,” was, at the time, a true blockbuster. It was, in its day, the most expensive film ever made, and it had the second highest box office take in 1952 ($11 million). It was also nominated for eight Academy awards—though it won none.

One can read the importance of this film in a variety of contexts, including the history of American cinema as a whole. Within the framework of my interests in this essay, however, I am especially concerned with the contribution the film makes to the emergence and consolidation of a particularly American Cold War cultural argument, generated through the mobilization of a series of historical analogies. In this process, “American values”—especially framed as “freedom from tyranny”—come to be embodied by the early Christian movement in first-century Rome. *Quo Vadis* makes this argument through its narrative, its mobilization of particular iconic elements, and its overarching construal of “history” itself.
The American *Quo Vadis* portrays Roman militarism and slavery as powerful institutions impervious to disruption except by an even more powerful force: that of Christianity. *Quo Vadis* gestures simultaneously backwards toward European fascism and contemporaneously toward emergent Cold War concerns. In the process, predictable analogies are constructed and displacements staged: Nero’s Rome stands for European imperialism and totalitarianism tout court; Nero himself appears to be an amalgam of Hitler and Mussolini (and Stalin, perhaps, as well); while the persecuted early Christians, framed as freedom-loving people, analogize American cultural/political/religious identities.

The opening scene of the film depicts the victorious Roman soldier Marcus Vinicius returning triumphantly to Rome at the head of a long parade of soldiers and war prisoner/slaves. As this scene unfolds visually, a “voice of God” narrator intones authoritatively and positions the audience in two distinct historical places at once:

This is the Appian Way, the most famous road that leads to Rome, as all roads lead to Rome. On this road march her conquering legions. Imperial Rome is the center of the empire and undisputed master of the world, but with this power inevitably comes corruption. No man is sure of his life. The individual is at the mercy of the state. Murder replaces justice. Rulers of conquered nations surrender their helpless subjects to bondage. High and low alike become Roman slaves, Roman hostages. There is no escape from the whip and the sword. That any force on earth can shake the foundations of this pyramid of power and corruption, of human misery and slavery, seems inconceivable, but thirty years before this day, a miracle occurred. On a Roman cross in Judaea, a man died to make men free, to spread the gospel of love and redemption. Soon that humble cross is destined to replace the proud eagles that now top the victorious Roman standards. This is the story of that immortal conflict. In this, the early summer of the year 64 A.D., in the reign of the Antichrist known to history as the emperor Nero, the victorious fourteenth legion is on its way back to Rome under the command of one Marcus Vinicius.

The film goes on to weave together a domestic romance tale with a story organized around competing visions of the world, sovereignty, and human existence. The story involves Marcus Vinicius, played by Robert Taylor, as a triumphant warrior who falls in love with the provincial princess (and Christian convert) Lygia, played by Deborah Kerr. The two characters embody the full range of oppositions that the film mobilizes to drive the narrative toward its conclusion: masculine/feminine, Roman/provincial, pagan/Christian, free/‘slave’, militarist-violent/peace-loving. The fact that these oppositions are coded by gender and embodied through sexuality is not incidental to the film’s project. Rather, gender and sexuality are central to the film’s efforts to produce an image of idealized Americanism (overlaid upon a stylized portrait of early Christianity). As cultural critic Melani McAlister has parsed the politics of this
film, *Quo Vadis* (along with other “biblical” and religious epics of the period) negotiates its message of political freedom through a complex interweaving of claims about racialized slavery and sexualized submission. In her words, “*Quo Vadis* engages in . . . a refiguration of the political problem of despotism and slavery onto the individual sexual fate of characters. . . . Marcus’s desire for Lygia, and her refusal to acquiesce to the status of sexual property, becomes the organizing plot of the film. . . . Lygia is a ‘Lygian,’ whose people were victims of Roman imperialism, but her nationalist and anti-Roman loyalties are quickly refigured as sexual independence.”23 As McAlister reads the film, the tension produced by Marcus’s imperialism and Lygia’s resistance is resolved through “the rules and rituals of Christian marriage.” As McAlister puts it succinctly, “In the logic of the film, the Roman system of taking women as sexual slaves is the mark of Roman tyranny; consensual heterosexual marriage is the normative practice of the oppressed.”24

The iconography of the film continually reiterates the opposition between imperial opulence and violence, on the one hand, and Christian simplicity and suffering, on the other. Roman decadence is even “orientalized” through the stock images of the Emperor and his household enjoying the exotic offerings of far-flung provinces. Imperial indulgence is likewise portrayed as soft, effeminate, at once dithering and impulsive and cruel. The feminine softness of Christianity is meanwhile resolved when the Roman soldier Marcus bonds with the Christian provincial princess Lygia and creates a new family, properly organized around patriarchal, nuclear family values. Such “historical” iconography then maps onto the current moment of enunciation—post-war American culture, embedded as it was in new kinds of international relations and domestic cultural politics. The old world, the foreign, the imperial, the Latinate (read: European, even Catholic) are signaled by material extravagance and excess. The future, the domestic, the Christian are marked visually by icons of simplicity and solidarity, the primitive Church (read: American, Protestant). Yet although *Quo Vadis* creates an argument that situates American Christian freedom over against European pagan tyranny, it can still allow for a few traces of European culture, primarily in the form of museum pieces and tourist spectacles. Just so, the iconography of the film also engages in an intertextual echo with earlier versions of *Quo Vadis*. Just as these earlier adaptations themselves borrowed from nineteenth-century academic painting, especially the Roman spectacle paintings of Jean-Léon Gérôme, the Hollywood spectacle version of the film also quotes from the history of Western art, most notably in the tableau vivant of the last supper that appears as Peter preaches a sermon to the Christians in the catacombs.

Set within the frame of 1950s American cultural politics, *Quo Vadis* participates in the production of what Foucault might call the history of the
present, reconfiguring ideas of domesticity and empire in the process. Cultural projects like this epic film are not simple or straightforward allegories of Cold War politics, as some have read them. Rather, the film itself creates a history of conquest—the movement from an old world to a new world, away from anachronistic tyrannies and toward freedom, out of violence and perversion and into familial and domestic tranquility, conquest not by the sword but by love. Hence the character, Marcus Vinicius, embodiment of Roman militarism, will aver early on in the film: “Conquest . . . It’s the only method of uniting and civilizing the world under one power—you have to spill a little blood to do it.” Just so, the character, Paul, will challenge Marcus to reconceptualize the very idea of conquest: “Has it occurred to you to put down your sword and renounce war against these people? Has it occurred to you that you might conquer them with love?” As Melani McAlister notes, “Love is not the alternative to conquest [in Quo Vadis] but the alternative model of conquest.”

The Cold War cultural argument of Quo Vadis is not only legible through its narrative, iconographic, and historiographic registers. That the film was part of a Cold War project can also be seen in the history of its creation, especially through the pivotal involvement of John Lee Mahin, the first of three credited screenwriters, the other two being S. N. Behrman and Sonya Levien. Mahin is perhaps not a household name, but he was a prolific writer who generated over fifty screenplays during a career that spanned four decades. Originally one of the founders of the Screen Writers Guild in 1933,
later in that same decade he helped to found and became president of the competing Screen Playwrights, a company union. He also served for a time as the president of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, a right-wing and devotedly anti-communist organization founded by Walt Disney, Leo McCarey, and Sam Wood. (During the years of the House Un-American Activities Committee, many of the friendly witnesses came from the Alliance. Robert Taylor, the actor who played Marcus Vinicius in *Quo Vadis*, was also a member of the Alliance.) The year after *Quo Vadis* was released, Mahin wrote the screenplay for *My Son, John*, a film that is widely recognized as the quintessential anti-communist Red Scare film. Mahin’s role in the creation of *Quo Vadis* reminds us that the cultural work of such texts is not simply allegorical. The film’s portrait of Roman imperialism and early Christian martyrdom is more than a mere reflection of existing Cold War pro-American, anti-communist values. Like so many other artifacts that are players in the “culture wars,” *Quo Vadis* actually helps to produce those values; it does not simply mirror them.

**MUHAMMAD ALI AS SAINT SEBASTIAN (ESQUIRE, APRIL 1968)**

*Quo Vadis* was organized around a certain type of “American” hero, the fictional Roman-soldier-turned-Christian Marcus Vinicius. My final example is also organized around an “American” hero, one who also comes to be framed as a citation of the type, Roman soldier-turned-Christian-martyr. But this example is less didactic than the previous two and more openly ironic and provocative. It is marked with a decided twist that comes out of the racial, religious, and antiwar politics of the 1960s. Whereas *The Blood of the Martyrs* and *Quo Vadis* use the early Christian martyr story to construct narrative allegories of anti-fascist and anti-communist struggle within the frames of World War II and the Cold War, my third example uses the medium of journalistic photography to construct American society itself as the imperial overlord and to frame its subject as the Christian martyr resistant to American imperial ways. This example emerges out of a very different war frame: a new, more hotly contested war—the war in Vietnam.

The example is a photograph that appeared on the cover of *Esquire* magazine in April 1968, in which Muhammad Ali posed as Saint Sebastian, in an ironic quotation of an Italian Renaissance painting now attributed to Francesco di Giovanni Botticini of the Roman-soldier-turned-Christian-martyr. In the photograph, Ali is dressed in boxing costume, and his torso and his right thigh are pierced bloodily with arrows; his head tilts upward at a saintly and suffering angle reminiscent of countless passion scenes from the repertoire of European painting. Quoting the iconography of Saint Sebastian, whose legend celebrates the martyrdom of an imperial soldier who, because of
his religious convictions, refuses to fight, the *Esquire* cover effectively framed Ali’s conscientious objection to service in the U.S. military in martyrological terms.\(^30\)

The cover glossed a story that was still unfolding in April 1968. Four years earlier, in March 1964, Ali (then Cassius Clay) had been classified 1-Y by a Kentucky military draft board, a classification that would have resulted in an indefinite deferral of military service because Clay had scored too low on the army’s aptitude tests. In between March 1964 and February 1966, Cassius Clay converted to the Nation of Islam and changed his name twice, first to Cassius X and then to Muhammad Ali. In February 1966, Ali’s military classification was changed by the Kentucky draft board from 1-Y to 1-A—fit for service. In April 1967, Ali famously refused induction into the U.S. military, stating, in part:

> It is in the light of my consciousness as a Muslim minister and my own personal convictions that I take my stand in rejecting the call to be inducted in the armed services. I do so with the full realization of its implications and possible consequences. I have searched my conscience and I find I cannot be true to my belief in my religion by accepting such a call.

> My decision is a private and individual one and I realize that this is a most crucial decision. In taking it I am dependent solely on Allah as the final judge of these actions brought upon by my own conscience.\(^31\)

The Selective Service rejected Ali’s claim to conscientious objector status, in part by calling into question the legitimacy of the Nation of Islam as an authentic religion. As a result of Ali’s claim and its rejection by the Selective Service, he was charged, tried, and convicted of draft evasion; stripped of his world heavyweight boxing title; and sent into a kind of cultural exile. The virulence of the response by the government and by boxing officials did not take place in a political vacuum. Indeed, Ali had already by May 1966 become the object of intense scrutiny by the federal government, including covert wiretaps and other forms of surveillance ordered by FBI director, J. Edgar Hoover. Moreover, the backlash against Ali in the wake of his conversion to the Nation of Islam and the intensity of the institutional pressure on him to recant his conscientious objection are well documented. Eventually, Ali’s conviction would be overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1971, but Ali was still a highly controversial and much-reviled public figure, enduring professional exile and the threat of imprisonment for his anti-war stance.

The degree to which his case became a flashpoint in a whole series of political conflicts in American culture at the time, especially those concerning race and the war, can be seen in the intense media coverage of the ongoing judicial battle. It can also be seen graphically in the pages of *Esquire* magazine. The April 1968 cover of *Esquire* representing Ali as Saint Sebastian glossed
Leonard Shechter’s story, “The Passion of Muhammad Ali,” which drew a detailed portrait of Ali’s post-conviction exile. A year and a half later, another *Esquire* cover featured a photograph of twelve men—writers, artists, actors, athletes, and journalists—all standing in a boxing ring, pointing toward the camera and declaring through a headline: “We believe this: Muhammad Ali deserves the right to defend his title.” The twelve men are joined by ninety other signatories within the magazine’s pages, in an article that searingly critiques the overreaching prosecution/persecution of Ali.

The April 1968 *Esquire* cover was the brainchild of a Madison Avenue adman named George Lois. Lois has recently recounted the story of the portrait’s creation in his photographic memoir, *$ellebrity* and in an interview published in a special issue of *Stop Smiling Magazine* (“the magazine for high-minded lowlifes”) devoted specifically to boxing. While Cassius Clay-turned-Muhammad Ali was experiencing his meteoric rise in boxing, his conversion to Islam, and his prosecution by the U.S. government, George Lois was an innovator in the world of advertising who had been producing provocative covers for *Esquire* magazine since the early 1960s. Lois approached Ali with the idea of photographing him as Saint Sebastian. Lois brought with him to the meeting with Ali a postcard from the Metropolitan Museum of Art that reproduced a late fifteenth-century Italian portrait of Sebastian’s martyrdom. In Lois’s account of his negotiation with the boxer, Ali examined the Renaissance portrait carefully and then exclaimed, “Hey, George, this cat’s a Christian!” What followed was a telephone negotiation with Elijah Muhammad, the founder and leader of the Nation of Islam, who ultimately gave his permission for the image to be created by photographer Carl Fischer. In the *Stop Smiling* interview published in March 2005, Lois describes the process by which the shot came to be staged. While it was being set up, Ali jokingly pointed to the different arrows affixed to his torso, naming each one: Lyndon Johnson. General Westmoreland. Robert McNamara. And others from the president’s cabinet.

The photograph of Ali on the cover of *Esquire* in spring 1968 came to serve as a potent pop culture critique of U.S. involvement in the war in southeast Asia and a graphic articulation of the high costs paid by some, at least, for their resistance to that war. Culturally, Ali straddled a complicated insider-outsider divide: an American hero for his unrivalled boxing record, but an African American and a Muslim who endured many years of surveillance by J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI. The *Esquire* photograph recirculated, in an ironic and citational mode, a canonical European Renaissance image of early Christian martyrdom, translating it into a new, pop art idiom and using the ancient Christian story in the service of an ongoing twentieth-century political struggle.

The photograph itself, as it appeared on the cover of *Esquire*, acted as a heated provocation within cultural debate in U.S. politics. It brought together,
in a single icon, arguments about race, religion, militarism, political resistance and its costs. It did so through a complex series of artistic gestures, citations, analogies, and juxtapositions. Sebastian and Ali had literally fought their ways into positions of influence in societies with imperial structures or aspirations: Sebastian, in the Roman imperial guard; Ali, in the center ring of boxing celebrity in the U.S. in the 1960s. Yet each had only a provisional claim on his position of privilege, conditioned upon participating in the reigning structures of military and political constraint. Both figures suffered real or metaphorical exile for their religious convictions, and according to the iconography that grows up around his story, Sebastian bore the price of his conviction in his arrow-pierced body. Both Sebastian and Ali were fighters who, because of religious conviction, refused to serve their respective empires militarily. By posing Ali as Sebastian, George Lois placed a highly provocative image in play inside an already contentious debate being waged within American society about militarism, conscientious objection, and political dissent around the Vietnam War.

The photograph that Lois staged also entered into an iconographical conversation with the artistic history of Saint Sebastian’s image, and not only the Botticini portrait on which the photograph was intentionally based. There are literally hundreds of versions of the image, produced over the centuries from the Renaissance on forward, each interpreting the nearly canonical iconography of vulnerable male body, wounded, incapacitated, and suffering. Like the Botticini painting, many of the canonical images from the history of European art position Sebastian against an elaborate backdrop, intentionally framing and even staging the image. Andrea Mantegna’s famous mid-fifteenth-century portraits, for example, render Sebastian himself in a near-sculptural mode, poised against a highly stylized antique Roman backdrop that shows distinct signs of fragmentation and disintegration. As Sebastian stands wounded and bleeding, Rome herself falls into ruins. A slightly later painting (dated to 1525) by Antonio Bazzi (the artist frequently known by the epithet, “Il Sodoma”) offers a more naturalistic setting with antique ruins set discreetly in the background. Elements of these two kinds of settings—the Roman architectural setting and the setting in nature—are endlessly replicated in later versions of the portrait, as seen in these two twentieth-century portraits—one taken from the 1960s series, “Ordeal by Roses,” created by Japanese photographer Eikoh Hosoe, with Mishima as his subject, and (rather more postmodernly) a Versace ad from the 1990s. Both of these images also highlight the homoerotic character of some portraits of Sebastian, a dimension of the iconography devoted to the saint that will become increasingly important in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The Roman imperial background, fragmented and crumbling, offers a theatrical and historical frame for the figure of the wounded saint: it dramatizes the political forces that are responsible for the Sebastian’s suffering while also implying visually that these forces are themselves far from potent, indeed, just steps away from ruins. By contrast, the Esquire cover portrays Ali as Sebastian against a blank, starkly white background. Ali’s body is not displayed languorously in the style of so many Sebastians, nor in the vulnerable nearly-nude mode that characterizes the standard iconography for the saint. Ali’s boxing costume, complete with laced-up shoes, disrupts the viewer’s expectation for this portrait, foregrounding the anachronism that allows the image and the analogies it sets in motion to do their work. Ali is not Sebastian, but by figuring him through the received Renaissance iconography of the arrow-pierced martyr, Lois intervenes in a much broader debate that challenges its participants to rethink the meanings of Ali’s story and struggle in a radical way. Remaking the image of the world heavyweight champion and Muslim minister as the quintessential early Christian martyr, but foregrounding his defiance rather than the simple suffering embodied in the canonical image,
Lois reconfigures the Sebastian story itself while at the same time condemning white Christian America’s hypocrisies as they played themselves out racially and religiously in domestic politics and militarily and nationalistically in the international frame.  

Lois’s “Passion of Muhammad Ali” is distinctive in relation to Mitchison’s earnset anti-Fascist narrative and the campiness of Quo Vadis’s anti-communist clichés. Unlike the other two examples, Lois’s project is not didactic but verges on the accusatory. It performs its political work through provocation and incitement. It retains the scandalous elements of martyrdom. Since Esquire’s audience was at the time certainly (if not also today) overwhelmingly white and male and privileged, the viewers of the photograph likely did not simply identify with the singular figure of Muhammad Ali, resituated in the martyrrological frame. Indeed, the distancing and disidentifications that the photograph inspires make a starker political demand upon its viewers, rendering the photograph a raw accusation by situating the viewer in the morally compromised position either of archer or by-standing spectator. To look at the photograph is to be pulled into complicity with the persecution of Muhammad Ali or, alternatively, to be jolted out of complacency and into political action.

CONCLUSION

Martyrdom continues to strike a resonant chord where political struggles are taking place and when those who seek to mobilize others to their cause attempt to find an irrefutable authorizing ground for their stance in those struggles. It is, I think, no accident that all three of my examples—Naomi Mitchison’s The Blood of the Martyrs, LeRoy’s Quo Vadis, and Carl Fischer’s “The Passion of Muhammad Ali”—emerged in periods of war or the threat of war, at moments when war was framed as transformative of the grand narrative of history itself. It is in such moments of catastrophe and crisis, uncertainty and heightened conviction that the martyr/the suffering innocent emerges especially as a figure to convince and reassure.

It is also worth noting the ease with which “one’s funny ideas about ancient history,” as Mitchison called them rather wittily in one of her memoirs, can be woven so effortlessly into the modern frame. Early Christian martyrs wander so easily into the popular literature of a Scottish socialist-feminist, onto the Hollywood screen by way of red-scared screenwriters and directors, and onto the cover of a popular magazine whose tagline was “the magazine for men.” This is part of the genius, of course, of popular and mass culture—as much as many professional historians might enjoy critiquing and disparaging these modes of making sense of the past. But it is also part of the compelling if ambivalent legacy of martyr stories themselves, stories that are so often evasive of the historian’s attempts to pin them down and resistant to the historian’s efforts at dissection.
But I have called that legacy “ambivalent” because the political uses to which such stories can and have and will be put cut in all directions, not all of which are salutary. Moreover, as we all know, the language and rhetoric of persecution when deployed in public debate have a distinctive power to clear the room of any other points of view. That the martyr story has extraordinary power in its popular and mass culture manifestations is incontrovertible, as I hope my brief genealogy has shown.

In his recent book, Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth, literary critic John Beverley asks the question: “Who are the Christians today?” His question is a rhetorical provocation, taking up the influential, even archetypal story of early Christian martyrdom, and laying it over the current global imperial situation. In asking this question, Beverley, I believe, is trying to interrogate contemporary geo-political relationships, recognizing that the United States occupies the position of imperial power, doing so while politically dominated by a particular iteration of right-wing Christianity: neoconservatism and theoconservatism joined in a powerful marriage of convenience. Using the archetype of Roman-empire-vs.-Christian-martyrs as a heuristic frame, Beverley is challenging his readers to consider the implications of American empire by asking, in essence, who are its innocent victims? Although I am politically uneasy with this move, if it is not also accompanied by a critical, deconstructive gesture toward the logic of martyrdom as a whole, I nevertheless appreciate the question for its ethical provocation: within the frame of American imperial relationships, who, indeed, are the Christians today? This question is not trying to get at the identity of historically constituted Christian individuals and communities (many of whom, in fact, oppose American imperialism), but rather asks us to ponder who occupies the position of “Christian martyr” in the sweeping story of American empire. Beverley’s provocation suggests that “the Christians today” may not even be Christian, and it invites us to rethink the arrangements of our current world order—one that most certainly implicates American Christians, however unhappily and resistantly, in the imperial project. Beverley’s question, “Who are the Christians today?” underscores the continuing rhetorical and ethical force of the figure of the Christian martyr for political analysis and argument. Who will choose to use early Christian martyrs to think with next, and how, is a matter that still unfolds around us.

NOTES
1. A version of this essay was presented as a plenary address at the North American Patristics Society Annual Meeting in June 2005. I am grateful to Maureen Tilley and Georgia Frank for the invitation to give this address. The current version of the essay has benefited from the critiques and suggestions by two anonymous readers and by Spiritus editor, Douglas Burton-Christie. Thanks to Chad Miller for his help with background research on the iconography of St. Sebastian and to my 2005–2006
research assistant at the Pembroke Center at Brown University, Religious Studies doctoral student Debra Scoggins, for her help in tracking down several important citations. I also want to express my particular gratitude to photographer Carl Fischer for his trust in allowing us to reprint his image of Muhammad Ali as Saint Sebastian, which appears on the cover of the print version of this issue of *Spiritus*, as well as to Kim Lloyd-George, Fischer’s assistant, for her efforts on our behalf.


3. A similar kind of temporal fluidity can be found in the Shi’ite martyrological tradition, captured succinctly in the slogan, “Every Day is Ashura, Everywhere is Karbala.”


18. William Morris, “All for the Cause,” *Poems by the Way* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1891). The lines of verse, which open the poem, are these:

Hear a word, a word in season, for the day is drawing nigh,
When the Cause shall call upon us, some to live and some to die.
He that dies shall not die lonely, many an one hath gone before,
He that lives shall bear no burden heavier than the life they bore.

19. This quotation has achieved near-canonical status in the history and collective memory of the Sacco-Vanzetti case and appears in virtually every source related to the case. The innocence of these two Italian immigrants is now widely recognized, as is their status as martyrs to a combination of anti-immigrant prejudice and collective nativist hysteria concerning early twentieth-century radical politics. The robbery and murder for which they were convicted and condemned was purportedly the act of members of a New England criminal gang headed by a gangster named Butsey Morelli. See Mike Stanton, *The Prince of Providence: The True Story of Buddy Cianci, America’s Most Notorious Mayor, Some Wiseguys, and the Feds* (New York: Random House, 2003), 8.


21. *Ben-Hur* was a bestseller for half a century after its publication and repeatedly staged and filmed in the decades that followed its publication (Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* [New York: Routledge, 1997], 17). Over three-quarters of a million copies of the English translation of *Quo Vadis* were sold in one year in England and the United States, and the book went on to be translated from Polish into over thirty languages. Its author, Henryk Sienkiewicz, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1905, and the presentation speech for this award stresses the signal importance of *Quo Vadis*; see http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/1905/press.html.


28. A brief, irresistible aside about this odd film: In *My Son, John*, the protagonist is a cocky, intellectual young man who works for a federal agency. Returning to his parents’ home after a long time away, John scandalizes his parents with pro-Soviet cant and anti-capitalist rhetoric. In an especially memorable scene, the man’s father, attempting to bring him back into the capitalist fold, hits the son over the head with the family Bible. Another example, however oblique, of using early Christians to think with...

29. The *Esquire* cover appears on the cover of this issue of *Spiritus*. It may also be accessed electronically at http://www.esquire.com/covergallery/coverdetail.html?y=1968&m=4. The painting on which the photograph was modeled is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. It was bought in the 1940s as a painting by Andrea del Castagno, but has since been identified as the work of Francesco di Giovanni Botticini (ca. 1446–1497). Its dating is uncertain, with some placing it as early as 1465. See the note on the image on the Met’s website: http://www.metmuseum.org/Works_Of_Art/viewOne.asp?dep=11&viewmode=1&item=48%2E78&section=description#a.


34. Irwin Shaw, “Muhammad Ali and the Little People,” *Esquire* 72:5 (November 1969): 121–125, continued at 100–103. The list of signatories to the “Ali deserves to defend his title” statement includes academics (Kenneth Burke, Leslie Fielder), artists (Jasper Johns, Edward Steichen), actors (Harry Belafonte, Elizabeth Taylor, Joel Grey, among others), writers (e.g., John Barth, Ralph Ellison, Paul Goodman, Kathryn Anne Porter,
among others), musicians (Jim Morrison, Leontyne Price, Igor Stravinsky), politicians (Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, Senator Charles Goodell), and numerous other public figures.


36. Fischer’s photographs have earned him significant acclaim, most recently with a retrospective exhibition, “Carl Fischer: Photographs 1963–1977,” at the Galerie Wouter van Leeuwen in Amsterdam, 3 September – 8 October 2005. The Muhammad Ali image was also included in the exhibition, “The World’s Most Photographed,” at the National Portrait Gallery in London, 6 July – 23 October 2005. In October 2005, the image was voted one of the top forty magazine covers of the last forty years by the American Society of Magazine Editors; see Mark Feeney, “Judged by their covers,” *Boston Globe*, 18 October 2005, C3; see also [www.magazine.org](http://www.magazine.org). Thanks to Arlene Keizer for bringing this ASME award to my attention.


44. For a yet more graphic image of defiance, see the photograph contained within the article itself, at *Esquire* 69:4, no. 413 (April 1968): 129, where Ali abandons the saintly pose and grimaces aggressively directly at the camera.
45. Far less powerful knock-offs of the Muhammad Ali image have recently appeared in mass media contexts. On the cover of its September/October 2005 issue, the Hollywood gossip rag, *Radar: Pop, Politics, Scandal, Style*, featured a photograph of Tom Cruise, costumed as his character in the movie, “Risky Business,” pierced with arrows, and posed in a clear quotation of Carl Fischer’s iconic 1968 photograph of Muhammad Ali as Saint Sebastian. The image is glossed with the headline: “Exclusive! Risky Business: The Untold Story of Scientology’s Movie-Star Martyr.” Many thanks to Andy Alexis-Baker for bringing this cover to my attention. See also the recent ad for the Adidas Originals store in New York City, featuring a boxing costume-clad model in Saint Sebastian mode: *Time Out New York* (November 3–9, 2005): 51. Photograph by Jeff Harris.

46. World War I occasioned the mobilization of a whole culture of martyrdom and self-sacrifice, organized around the story of the passion and the figure of the crucified Christ. See Allen J. Frantzen, *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). Examples could multiply backwards in time in U.S. history (to the struggle against slavery and the Civil War, most certainly) and to the histories of other nations and regions of the world.
