

Martyrs' violent acts betray faith

By TIMOTHY O'TOOLE

First published: Saturday, October 14, 2006

For several years I puzzled over the curious symbols carved into the reredos at my church, First Presbyterian in Albany. I recognized the Ten Commandments, the Paschal lamb, the Star of David and even the Four Evangelists (though why Luke is an ox escaped me).

But the reredos included some intriguing, even barbaric symbols -- a saw, a club, a battle ax and a cup with an entwined serpent. Not exactly Sunday school fare. My curiosity got the better of me, and I asked around. It turns out the intricately carved reredos was a 1938 gift to the church, on the occasion of its 175th anniversary. (A reredos is a decorative screen behind an altar. This curious word is derived from Old French for "behind the back.")

In 1950, a Sunday school teacher commissioned a detailed sketch of the reredos, which yielded the majority of clues to decode these symbols. The Internet filled in the blanks regarding those villainous symbols, associated with the earliest Christian martyrs. Simon was sawed in two. Bartholomew was flayed alive. First Presbyterian's Web site relayed these gory details to its visitors. This got me to thinking about martyrdom and torture. Both have been in the news of late.

We are all too familiar with the degrading Abu Ghraib photos, the prolonged detention of "enemy combatants" at Guantanamo Bay, and "extreme rendition" of terror suspects to secret jails. Some of us still remember the rock 'n' roll music blasted at Panama's dictator, Gen. Manuel Noriega. To really torture him, we should have played Wayne Newton records.

Long before the Geneva Convention, Roman authorities, threatened by new ideas, responded with barbarous treatment of Christians and Jews alike. Perhaps some of the tortures were intended to extract information regarding fellow travelers. No cellphones in those days, just cells.

Public executions were used as public educational entertainment, pandering to blood lust and encouraging conformity and submission to authority. It didn't work. Christian martyrs and Holocaust survivors are memorialized in stained glass.

Now we are faced with a new crop of would-be martyrs, their very existence kept secret unless their capture is trumpeted for political gain. Coming from the ranks of the powerless and disenfranchised, like the early Christians, they too seek to overturn the status quo. And like medieval Christians, they imagine their homicidal acts are God's will. The Shia-Sunni power struggle in Iraq is reminiscent of Europe in the Middle Ages. In 1209, Simon de Montfort led his crusaders to sack the city of Beziers in southern France. When its population of Albigensian heretics and "good" Christians huddled in their church, the Abbot of Citeaux instructed Montfort to "Slay them all! God will know his own."

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Christians and Jews have managed to ignore "You shall not murder" time and time again. Must one people annihilate another people to survive and grow? "Love one another, as I have loved you" is a hard act to follow.

Mohammed must be weeping alongside Moses and Jesus when he sees his purported followers ignore his own sayings in the Hadith: "A Muslim is the brother of a fellow-Muslim. He should neither commit oppression upon him nor

give him up to an enemy." "He who pointed a weapon toward his brother, the angels invoke curse upon him." "When two Muslims confront each other and the one among them attacks his brother with a weapon, both the murderer and the murdered will get into Hell-Fire."

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