

Guest Editorial

Christian Persecution and Suffering

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During a recent trip to Egypt, I had an interesting encounter that made me rethink how contexts or worldviews define our understanding as Christians of persecution and suffering. During our dinnertime, I saw a person serving food who had a tattoo mark of a cross just above his thumb on the outside of his hand. I later found out that most Christians have this same mark. Intrigued, I enquired of my friend about this practice of tattooing. The explanation even now continues to humble me. He explained that most Christians that he knew have this tattoo so that if they were to be martyred for their faith and identity, they could be identified and given a Christian burial. I have always understood that most Christians have a cross around their neck or have a tattoo of the cross on their body to identify themselves as Christians while they are still alive. However, when I heard this explanation I had to expand my understanding that “carrying” a cross is not a privileged fashion statement during a Christian’s life. It is also something that needs to be “carried” until death—for, through, and with Christ.

The Indian Christian mystic Sadhu Sunder Singh once remarked, “It is easy to die but difficult to live for Christ.” Singh’s insight, coupled with my experience in Egypt, poses an interesting question: How do Christians living in various contexts perceive persecution and suffering? In answering that question, it is important to acknowledge that Christians’ perspectives and worldviews concerning persecution and suffering due to Christian faith and identity differ depending on the country and context. I can identify three kinds of contexts that define a Christian’s understanding of persecution and suffering for their faith. The first is those contexts in which Christians are a majority, where the Christian religion has a privileged position and anything less is never an option. The second type of context is where Christians live as a minority, have freedom that may be restricted, yet because of some constitutional provision they can practice, propagate, and profess their faith but face several internal and external challenges. The third category is where Christians are second-class citizens, are completely marginalized, may have some or no freedom to practice, and propagation is illegal. The articles published in this special issue to some extent have representation of these three types of contexts.

Related to their various contextual locations is how some Christians use freedom of religion as a means to protect and preserve the Christian population. In some nations where they are in a minority and suffer persecution, Christians perceive freedom of religion used as a weapon by agencies from other countries on theirs as a form of interfering in their internal affairs. In various other cases, Christians live in a minority mind-set and often see themselves as socially and politically disempowered. Along with how this issue’s articles are situated in the various types of contexts described above is how they also reflect the different approaches that Christian communities take in dealing with their contextual status—whether perceived or actual. This array of approaches can also be instructive about how the theme of Christian persecution and suffering can be understood, practised, and articulated.

This special issue has five featured articles composed from various perspectives and contexts. The first article by John provides an honest first-hand reflection on the ongoing Hindutva agenda in the Northeast of India, especially in Manipur. The second article then transports us to another continent where Islamic terrorist groups have affected the lives, churches, and Christian witness in the Far North Region of Cameroon. In that article Bongoyok

provides an excellent historical and cultural background of this region where Christians have been the target because of their faith, leaving them in a crisis and resulting in the need for immediate intervention in the form of holistic community development. The third article, by Kin and Joseph, looks at how Uyghur people, particularly Christians, are doubly persecuted and pleads for love and reconciliation between Uyghurs and Han Chinese. The next article focuses on persecution in India but focuses from a different angle. George, as a diaspora Indian in America, brings out very useful insights on trans-national connections and how they respond to persecutions happening in India. He discusses how this process has resulted in the forging of a new connection between Indian Christians and the diaspora Indian Americans, especially Indian Christian youth in America. The final article by Maroney examines Paul's view of the persecution of believers for their faith, suggests three foundations, and draws out implications for today's global Church.

I hope and trust that as you read these articles you will be able to reflect on this issue's theme of Christian persecution and suffering in your own context. You may consider using these articles to equip Christians and churches for an era in which practising, professing, and sharing the Christian faith and beliefs with neighbours is becoming progressively challenging. On the one hand, most Western societies are decreasingly influenced by the Christian faith—often seeing it as irrelevant—and very often are quite hostile toward Christianity and its promoters. By contrast, in the Global South the Christian faith is increasing but in contexts of persecution and suffering as well as theological confusion, not just over matters of faith but also over challenging economic and socio-political issues. Moreover, most nations are increasingly becoming nationalistic, and we are beginning to see a multi-polar world within geo-politics. In the midst of such circumstances, may our triune God continue to strengthen, refine, and grow the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ.