

STRIVING TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF PERSECUTION¹

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The present article emphasizes the need to give greater theological reflection to the religious persecution of Christians. Statistics show that since the Church's inception nearly 70 million Christians have been killed for their faith with 65% of these martyrs dying in the 20th century alone (Barrett and Johnson 2001: 227, 229). Including victims of persecution² which do not die for their faith, but rather live daily with threats, ridicule, torture, and/or imprisonment would further inflate these numbers. These facts are startling indeed, but they are not met with the theological reflection that their frequency and significance demand. This lack of theological reflection is illustrated by Christian groups who react to persecution with their own brands of violence.³ Such ungodly responses effectively blur a theological understanding of persecution and mar Christ's intended purposes behind it. With this in mind, the present study outlines the most common theological treatments of persecution, revealing serious misconceptions in the Church's understanding of the event. We then explore the importance of adequately defining persecution and how this might foster subsequent theological reflection.

Overcoming Faulty Theological Perceptions

If the Church is to give persecution the theological reflection it deserves, we must first overcome the build-up of faulty perceptions and misguided thinking that often characterize our theological views of persecution. Such faulty perceptions generally fall into one of four categories: 1) those that treat persecution as a solely eschatological experience; 2) those that

view persecution as an isolated historical experience; 3) those that equate persecution with general suffering; and 4) those that treat persecution as an exclusively Majority World⁴ experience.

To begin with, we must acknowledge the present-day experience of persecution by re-focusing our views of it away from the future and on the here-and-now. In this way, our perspective on persecution must include more than just the experience of it that may be an eschatological event.⁵ Works like Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth* and the more recent *Left Behind* series of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins have popularized the view that a time is coming when intense persecution will begin to occur or significantly increase. While elements of this perspective may be true depending on one's eschatology, such a view cannot be emphasized at the expense of present experiences. Doing so effectively demeans our perspective of the persecution that occurs presently. If persecution is to receive the theological reflection it deserves, we must acknowledge our present day experience of it regardless of the place it has in future events.

Building from this, we must also re-focus theological reflection away from the past and the view that persecution is an isolated historical event. Ugandan theologian Dan Kyanda refers to this view as the 'historical exemption' in light of the opinion that persecution "... [does not] happen anymore" (1979: 98). Such a view mitigates the present-day experience of an event that is much more frequent and widespread than the early Church's experience of it. Even early on, the wider recognition and greater peace Constantine's reign brought to the Church did not quell the presence of violence against it. This was especially true in areas lying on the fringes or outside of the Roman Empire. With this in mind, Samuel Moffett labels the intense persecution endured by Persian believers beginning in 339 A.D., after the rise of Constantine, as "... the

most massive persecution of Christians in history” (1992: 142). In effect, intense persecution moved east while Christendom rose in the West. As Western, intense persecution decreased, so did Western awareness of the event. This shift has given rise to the ‘historical exemption’ Kyanda refers to, causing our reflection on persecution to often be misguided and truncated if not altogether absent. Giving persecution the theological reflection it deserves means applying the lessons of history to events that still occur in the present.

Those that equate all types of suffering (i.e., natural disasters, sickness, etc.) with persecution also contribute to the widening gap between our awareness of persecution and the theological reflection we give to it. As Glenn Penner points out, “Because the biblical texts on persecution cannot be readily applied to a setting where there is little [less apparent] . . . persecution, the tendency seems to be . . . to misapply these passages to situations of general physical, psychological, and spiritual suffering” (2004: 8-9). While natural disasters and sickness are serious issues that demand a response from the Church, they cannot be equated with the experience of persecution. When they are, it is most often the former which garner the full attention of the Church leaving victims of religious persecution without the advocacy they need and without a strong ability to theologically reflect upon or respond to their experience. Distinctions must be made between general suffering and persecution so that neither experience is mitigated, nor is one emphasized over the other.

The view that persecution is only the experience of Christians in the Majority World is perhaps of greatest relevance for the global Church today. This view stems from a tendency to associate persecution with violent acts. For Christians in the West, this false association renders many unable to see the subtle, mild, and infrequent persecution that does occur in their societies. Consequently, what is perceived to be nonexistent is not appropriately addressed or it is left to

those portions of the Church who may experience persecution more. For Christians in the Majority World, persecution is easily associated with violence given an experience of it which can be much more frequent and intense. Christians in these regions however, have not necessarily matched their experience with more thorough theological reflection.⁶ Instead, many Majority World Christians focus their efforts on describing their experiences⁷ or they choose to question what they perceive to be an imbalance between what they experience and what may or may not occur in the West.⁸ While questions such as these can be theological, their focused nature allows for gaps in theological reflection on persecution to remain. The Church must seek to understand the full nature of persecution instead of focusing on perceived imbalances or what may seem to be nonexistent for a certain portion of the Church.⁹

The four categories outlined above illustrate the faulty perceptions that often follow theological treatments of persecution. More than this, they illustrate that where such faulty perceptions exist, our theological reflections are severely hampered. If we understand persecution correctly, we must acknowledge that it is a part of Christian living in the here-and-now, for every member of the Church. This means that the global Church must once again acknowledge Christ's claim that those who follow him will be persecuted (Matt. 4:11-12).¹⁰ Such recognition will help eliminate faulty perceptions and strengthen theological reflections on persecution.

Defining Persecution and Fostering Reflection

Underlying the misconceptions outlined above is a tendency to inadequately define persecution. Such inadequacies begin with poor or completely absent definitions of the term. Accordingly, Peter Kuzmič aptly states, "Contemporary reference works on religion move remarkably easily from 'Perfectionism' to 'Perseverance'" (2004-2005: 35). Penner agrees,

remarking, “There is, unfortunately, no universally accepted legal or theological definition of the word” (2004: 163). Indeed, even where attempts are made, current definitions all too commonly focus on only certain manifestations of persecution or only its presence in a certain period of time. Inadequacies continue where understandings of persecution among those who experience it most are truncated. In this light, many note the tendency of persecuted Christians to deny their experience because they do not see specific manifestations of the event, such as brutality or systematic oppression. For instance, a pastor in former Czechoslovakia denied the presence of religious persecution because he saw no cases of physical brutality even though his church, under a religiously oppressive government, was forced to worship in secret. Additionally, worshippers traveled to church using complex and hard-to-follow streets in order to ensure secrecy. Similar responses come from Christians in other regions of the world including areas where religious freedom may be granted in theory, but in practice Christians are still subject to a wide range in types of persecution (Schlossberg 1990: 17). A clear theological definition of persecution will further bolster the Church’s ability to add theological reflection to a growing, Christian experience.

The present study understands a theological definition of the religious persecution of Christians to be:

Any unjust action of varying levels of hostility perpetrated primarily on the basis of religion and directed at Christians,¹¹ resulting in varying levels of harm as it is considered from the victim’s perspective.

This definition has three essential elements which can be further elucidated as follows:

1. ‘Varying levels of hostility’/‘Varying levels of harm’. Persecution manifests itself within a broad spectrum ranging from mildly hostile to intensely hostile actions. Mildly hostile actions are less intense and can be carried out psychologically or socially. These actions can include

ridicule, restriction, certain kinds of harassment, or discrimination. Intensely hostile actions lie at the opposite end of the spectrum and can also be carried out psychologically or socially, as well as physically. Such actions can include torture, imprisonment, or ostracism. In this light, one cannot theologially define persecution based on the level of harm it might cause or the level of hostility in which it occurs. Rather, it must be understood to encompass actions spanning the full range of hostility, from mild to intense.

2. *'Perpetrated primarily on the basis of religion'*. Persecution often occurs with an overlap of motivations (i.e., religion, race, culture, politics, etc.). Religious persecution occurs when religion is the *primary* factor involved in the event. With this in mind, Paul Marshall offers a helpful demarcation: “. . . if the persons had other religious beliefs, they [*sic*] would they still be treated in the same way. If the answer is yes, we probably should not call it specifically religious persecution, though not for a second should we forget that it is real persecution and that it is real people who suffer it” (Marshall 1998: 5).¹²

3. *'Victim's perspective'*. Perhaps most important, this element acknowledges the fact that persecutors cannot be the judges of their actions. For example, in the early portions of Acts, we see Saul (Paul) persecuting Christians because, to him, they posed a threat to the Jewish religious system. Saul's actions were surely justifiable to him in light of how he viewed Christians and their claims. In Acts 9 however, Jesus himself clarifies this issue for Saul saying that not only is he persecuting the Church, but he is in fact persecuting Christ himself. From the perspective of Saul's victim's, his actions were in fact unjust and persecutory.

Finally, it is important to understand this definition theologially and distinguish it from socio-political definitions. Socio-political definitions in general understand religious persecution to be any systematic violation of religious freedom.¹³ For example, Saudi Arabia maintains

severe restrictions upon non-Islamic expressions of religion. Within Saudi Arabia, these restrictions are widespread and consistent and are therefore understood as religious persecution. To such systematic violations, Marshall adds the elements of religious harassment (non-systematic or arbitrary violations) and religious discrimination (consistent, non-violations) (Marshall 1998: 4-5).¹⁴ Definitions like these are helpful, for they give specific, measurable parameters in which persecution can be analyzed and areas of the world in which these types of persecution occur can be ranked. This process aids both the Church and the international community in their efforts to act as advocates for those who are persecuted. Socio-political definitions, however, do not account for other types of persecution that come as a consequence of following Christ such as ridicule or ostracism. These actions may not be a part of systematic violations, nor may they be a part of arbitrary actions like harassment or discrimination. Yet even though they may not be illegal, theologically, they are still persecution.¹⁵ Recognizing the importance of a theological understanding of persecution will account for the full spectrum in which persecution occurs and bolster further theological reflection.

Conclusion

The consistency in which persecution occurs demands that the Church strive to give theological reflection to the event. If this is to occur, we must first adjust the misguided thinking of past theological reflection. In this light, persecution must be thought of as more than exclusively eschatological or isolated historical events. We cannot reflect theologically upon persecution in the same way in which we reflect upon suffering in general, nor can we assign the experience of persecution to specific regions of the world. Striving towards a theology of persecution means that the Church must also seek to agree upon an adequate, theological

definition of persecution. In the end, when a theology of persecution is set in place, the Church will be better equipped to respond to a growing phenomenon.

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¹ The following was originally presented as “Mission in Contexts of Violence: Forging Theologies of Persecution and Martyrdom” at the northeast regional conference of the Evangelical Missiological Society, April 8, 2006. It is based, in part, on the author’s thesis.

² When we use the term ‘persecution’ we are referring to the ‘religious persecution of Christians’ as defined above, though we recognize that persecution is not exclusively a religious phenomenon, nor is it solely directed at Christians (Marshall 1998: 2; Marshall 2004-2005: 27).

³ This occurred recently in northern Nigeria when Muslims demanded passersby to recite the *Shahāda*. If they could not, they were beaten and killed. Christians responded in like manner by demanding that passersby quote John 3:16. When they could not, as was the case for Muslims, they too were beaten and killed (Glaser 2005).

⁴ The Majority World is broadly understood here as Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe.

⁵ This does not imply that we neglect the biblical connection of persecution with the hope found in Christ’s future return. This point notwithstanding, we cannot neglect present experiences and their significance by solely focusing on the role of persecution in the future.

⁶ It should be noted that for many persecution itself is perhaps the greatest obstacle to theological reflection. This is most true for Majority World Christians who, because they are most intimate with persecution, might be the best candidates to offer theological reflection on the event. Due to the intensity of their persecution however, they are often unable to give significant time to thinking, writing, and sharing their reflections. Thus, the need for improved theological reflection remains.

⁷ Descriptive works inevitably contain isolated theological statements, most often regarding God’s purposes behind persecution or his ability to sustain in spite of it. Their importance notwithstanding, these works are meant to inform not necessarily to theologize (e.g., Yun and Hattaway 2002).

⁸ Works such as these (e.g., Chao 1984; Cunningham 1997: 340-342) fail to recognize a difference in what the present author refers to as the ‘universal presence of persecution’ and the ‘contextual experience of persecution’ (Tieszen 2005: 44-48).

⁹ For Christians in the West, this will often mean acknowledging an experience of persecution which is much less frequent and intense than Christians in the Majority World. In turn, this should compel those in the West to re-focus their theology and action on how they might better advocate for others.

¹⁰ Cf. Paul’s ‘theological expectation’ in 2 Tim. 3:12: “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus *will be persecuted*” (emphasis added).

¹¹ By ‘Christians’ we mean Christians “of all kinds, all traditions and confessions, and all degrees of commitment” (Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson 2001: 27). This is not to say, of course, that individuals from any religion or belief cannot also be the victim’s of religious persecution.

¹² The recent genocide in Rwanda is a helpful example here. Extremist Hutus annihilated Tutsis on the basis of tribal affiliation, not religion. Although there were certainly Christians persecuted and killed in this horrible event, religion was not a primary motivation, and thus this event should not be identified as religious persecution (Marshall 2004-2005: 27).

¹³ This would include the systematic denial of any of the rights of religious freedom understood by the United Nations’ ‘Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, 1981’. Here, individuals must be free to worship in accordance with the fundamentals of their faith and appropriately propagate their faith (Marshall “Present Day Persecution” 2000: 20-21).

¹⁴ Religious harassment refers to a “. . . situation where people, although perhaps not systematically imprisoned or denied the basic possibility of following their faith, nevertheless suffer from legal impediments and are interfered with by the authorities or others and face arbitrary arrest and possible physical assault.” Religious discrimination refers to a “. . . situation where people, although perhaps being guaranteed basic freedom of worship and other forms of religious freedom, nevertheless suffer consistent civil and economic disadvantage under the law for exercising such freedoms” (Marshall 1998: 4-5).

¹⁵ To illustrate this, consider a child of Muslim parents who converts to Christianity. Upon converting, the child’s parents disinherit and ostracize him/her from the family and the entire community. Doing so does not violate any religious freedoms (unless the child is subsequently attacked). However, considered theologically, this action is a consequence of following Christ. As such, it should be considered, theologically, as persecution and demands a response from the Church, perhaps not to the family, but in support of the child. (Marshall “Religious Freedom in the World” 2000: 16).
