Towards redefining persecution

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Abstract

This study is a reevaluation of the ways in which religious persecution is presently understood. After briefly demonstrating various shortcomings apparent in many considerations of the event, the author will set out a comprehensive definition of the religious persecution of Christians in an effort to overcome the misunderstandings that hamper theological reflection.

Keywords Persecution, theology of persecution, martyrdom.

Introduction

Since the Church's founding, nearly 70 million Christians have been killed for their faith (Barrett and Johnson 2001:227). Even more remarkable than this statistic is that the great majority of these – nearly sixty-five percent – were martyred in the twentieth century alone (229). While the historical forces behind these deaths change, the trend unfortunately has not, for at the mid-point of the present year, Christian martyrs were already estimated to have reached well over 150,000 (Barrett, Johnson and Crossing 2008:30).

These numbers are startling, yet how does one assess forms of persecution that may not be so violent or easily observable? How does one enumerate, for instance, ridicule, ostracism, or harassment? Consideration of acts such as these would surely exacerbate the numbers given above. It is perhaps as a result of persecution's elusive nature that the event lacks the reflection it so direly needs. While we do not lack for personal accounts of persecution experiences, and while these stories are helpful for those who must endure them, and

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helpful for those whose support might be rallied by reading them, this neglect is most apparent when it comes to the way the term is understood, and the attention it receives in *theological* reflection.

Regrettably, much of the theological reflection on persecution that is available to Christians today simply falls short of a thorough understanding of the event. This is evident in studies that limit religious persecution to the experience of the Early Church, and assert that it simply no longer occurs. Likewise, various studies limit the experience of persecution to only eschatological events, thinking that troubling times will only occur in the future as signposts for Christ's immanent return. Other studies reflect a misunderstanding of persecution insofar as they consider it to be a strictly violent act that may end in martyrdom. Thus, such experiences are mistakenly thought to be found only in the Majority World, not in the West, where freedom of religion is thought to be a widely accepted value. Still others extend the experience of persecution to all forms of suffering. Any unfortunate occurrence a Christian might endure, therefore, is thought to be persecution (Tieszen 2008:17–35).

Clearly, these reflections are simply not satisfactory, and contribute to our inability to adequately respond to and reflect upon genuine experiences of religious persecution. Moreover, it is these shortcomings that form the underpinnings of a tendency to rely on insufficient definitions of the term. To that end, the remainder of this study will strive to contribute towards a more complete definition of persecution.

Defining the religious persecution of Christians

Croatian theologian Peter Kuzmič laments, "Contemporary reference works on religion move remarkably easily from 'Perfectionism' to 'Perseverance'" (Kuzmič 2004–2005:35). Glenn Penner observes this absence of a definition as well, and remarks, "There is, unfortunately, no universally accepted legal or theological definition of [persecution]" (Penner 2004:163). Indeed, even where attempts are made, current definitions all too commonly reflect some of the misgivings noted above, choosing to define the event based on a period in which it may occur (applying it to the Early Church or as an end-times event), or to a manner in which it may manifest itself (violent acts).

Understanding persecution correctly cannot occur when definitions of the term are restricted or completely absent. In our study, a thorough definition is offered instead on three levels. On the first level, we begin by defining the term persecution in its most basic form, without reference to religion or to Christians, for confusion lies primarily at this level. On the second level, the importance of religion as a factor in determining the type of persecution involved in a given situation will be considered. It is here that we are also able to establish a socio-political definition of religious persecution. On the third level, we must combine the elements of persecution and religion with a definition of "Christian" in order to most accurately define the type of persecution we are reflecting on presently. Finally, we must understand this definition theologically in order to distinguish it from other socio-political definitions. These pieces, taken together, might possibly represent a more robust theological definition and understanding of the religious persecution of Christians.

Level one: Persecution

On this first level, persecution must be understood as an action. Consequently, one cannot merely have, for example, discriminatory attitudes and be a persecutor. Rather, persecutors act on these attitudes. When they do, persecution occurs. Further, this action should be viewed as unjust.

With this in mind, persecution occurs within a broad spectrum ranging from unjust actions that are intensely hostile, to those that are mildly hostile. Intensely hostile actions, lying at one end of the spectrum, can be carried out physically, psychologically (mentally or emotionally), or socially. These could encompass such actions as beating, torture, isolation, or imprisonment.

Mildly hostile actions lie at the opposite end of this spectrum. These actions are less intense, not violent, and can also be carried out psychologically or socially. These would include ridicule, restriction, certain kinds of harassment, or discrimination. Unjust actions that are mildly hostile are no less significant, and should still be considered as persecution. As a result, we cannot define persecution based on the level of pain it might cause, or the level of intensity in which it occurs. Instead, it must be understood to encompass actions spanning the full range of hostility, be they physical, psychological, or social. In this

light, a thorough definition of persecution will place an emphasis on unjust action manifesting itself within a spectrum of hostility.

Beyond this spectrum, we must remember that persecution may be carried out with a number of different motivations. Furthermore, these motivations often overlap, since persecution rarely has a single impetus (Marshall 1998:2; Marshall 2004–2005:27). Consider the example of a Hindu who marries outside of his or her caste. Doing so may require the parents to ostracize the couple from their entire community. This however, may not just be an issue of religion, but an issue of ethnicity as well, in that one's caste may be tied to one's particular indigenous group. Other situations could also represent a mix of "… political, territorial, and economic concerns" (Marshall 1998:2).

Finally, it is important, on this first level, to understand that the results of persecution are negative and persecutory when viewed from the victim's perspective. In this, negative results are harmful as long as we recognize that harm encompasses the same span of intensity as our understanding of hostility does. Harm, then, can be physical, psychological, or social, and occurs within a spectrum ranging from mildly to intensely hostile. Most important, however, is the recognition that such a definition is produced from the perspective of the victim, not that of the perpetrator.

Cases of nationalism may be helpful illustrations of this vital point. For nineteenth and early-twentieth century Turks, for example, their nationalistic "Turkey for the Turks" provided a basis for the expulsion of Armenians. While the situation was complex, and national security may originally have been a genuine concern, the deportation, genocide, and other horrific events that eventually followed were justified for many Turks in terms of nationalism. They were protecting or ridding their country of what to them were foreign and evil influences. For many Turks, their actions were just, and their results were positive. For Armenians, however, this was a clear case of persecution. It was an unjust action perpetrated on the basis of, in this case, ethnicity, politics, and religion. The results were in fact negative and persecutory. Other examples could include instances in which there was no intention of persecuting, yet persecution occurred nevertheless. As Paul Marshall makes clear: "The motive is not, per se, the issue; the key question is, what is the result?" (Marshall 2000b:17; Marshall 1998:7; Schirrmacher 2001:97-99).

On this first level, then, a definition of persecution must consider the elements of unjust action, a spectrum of hostility ranging from mild to intense, the motivations behind persecution, and the resulting effect of harm, all of which are considered from the victim's perspective. In its most basic form, we might define persecution as:

> An unjust action of varying levels of hostility with one or more motivations, directed at a specific individual or a specific group of individuals, resulting in varying levels of harm as it is considered from the victim's perspective.

Level two: Religious persecution

Keeping this basic definition in mind, we cannot assume that all persecution is always religious persecution. More specifically, religious people who are persecuted are not necessarily the victims of religious persecution. As Marshall observes, the conflicts occurring in Rwanda in the mid-1990's are illustrative of this important distinction (Marshall 2000b:9). In this case, Tutsis experienced much persecution, and even death, at the hands of Hutus, but even so, this was primarily an ethnic conflict. Religious people of various convictions made up parts of both sides, and so the nature and motivation of this persecution situation cannot be understood in religious terms. In short, Tutsis were persecuted regardless of their religion. With such examples in mind, we note that a victim's religious identity cannot be the sole factor that determines the type of persecution. Marshall helps us here once again:

> A possible demarcation point of religious persecution is to ask whether, 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).

The clarification we note on the first level applies here as well – rarely is religion, or any other single motivation, the only one involved. Other factors often overlap. What distinguishes certain cases as religious persecution is the primacy of religion as the leading factor. In our example from Rwanda, although religious people were certainly involved, religion itself was far from being a primary motivation of extremist Hutus. If we remove religious factors, Tutsis would still have been subjected to persecution, and so their experience cannot be

seen as religious persecution. Conversely, the experience of Christians in early-twentieth century communist Russia, while also involving political issues, centred on the religion of its victims. If we ask Marshall's question, we might conclude that these individuals could certainly have been spared if it had not been for their identity as Christians. Thus we can conclude that this is an example of religious persecution.

We must do more on this second level, however, than establish religion's role in persecution. With this in mind, most definitions of religious persecution operate on socio-political standards. Accordingly, religious persecution is "… in general, the denial of any of the rights of religious freedom" (Marshall 2000a:21). More specifically, religious freedom can be considered under the United Nations' "Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, 1981." Therein, individuals must be free not only to worship in accordance with the fundamentals of their religion, but they must also be free to change their religion, and to appropriately propagate their faith (20–21; Stott 1975:50). Socio-political definitions of religious persecution like these include, at the very least, genocide, but also focus on the *systematic* violation of religious freedoms. So, to supplement this understanding, Marshall includes the terms "harassment" and "discrimination" (Marshall 1998:5). In reference to religion and faith, then, harassment indicates "… 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" (5). In the same way, discrimination refers to "… a situation where people, although perhaps being guaranteed basic freedom[s], nevertheless suffer consistent civil and economic disadvantage under the law for exercising such freedoms" (5).

In this way, religious persecution includes systematic violations of religious freedom, but only in general. It must also include actions which may not be systematic, but occur irregularly (harassment). For example, this may occur if a state does not systematically prohibit the gathering of believers for worship, but arbitrarily disrupts them. Additionally, religious persecution may not always violate religious freedoms, and may occur in an environment that might otherwise guarantee religious freedom (discrimination). Religious minorities, for

instance, may have the right to live and assemble in certain countries, but may still face civic or economic disadvantages as members of their minority faith.

This socio-political definition, along with Marshall's additions, is important for both Christian and secular communities. In many cases, individuals deny that they experience persecution, because they see no cases of brutality or systematic persecution. For instance, some Christians deny the experience of persecution, because they have not been the victims of torture, yet they are forced to worship in secret (Schlossberg 1990:17). When victims of persecution are not aware of their own environment, others might find it difficult to advocate spiritually or politically on their behalf (Marshall 2004–2005:27). Similarly, such unawareness makes it difficult for the international community's efforts to eradicate religious persecution. In cases like these, standards of religious freedom are important, because violations of these standards act as proof of persecution where manifestations such as brutal beatings are not necessarily present. Socio-political definitions are also helpful in providing tangible ways in which to quantify persecution. As a result, quantifying the presence of these actions allows areas where they are a pervading problem to be ranked. This supports the Church and the international community in their efforts to focus prayer and/or action in opposition to religious persecution.

On this second level, then, religious persecution should be understood as:

> An unjust action of varying levels of hostility directed at *a believer or believers of a particular religion or belief system through systematic oppression or genocide, or through harassment or discrimination which may not necessarily limit these believers' ability to practice their faith,* resulting in varying levels of harm as it is considered from the victim's perspective, *each action having religion as its primary motivator.*

Level three: Religious persecution of Christians, theologically speaking

On this third level it must be understood that Christians are not the only religious victims who are persecuted for their beliefs. Muslims in India are persecuted by radical Hindu groups just as much, if not worse, than Indian Christians. Baha'i communities are religiously persecuted in Iran. Tibetan Buddhists and Muslim Uighurs are persecuted in China (27). We could easily list many other examples.

Thus, without mitigating the persecution of non-Christians, and without suggesting that matters of religious freedom are only Christian interests (Blunt 2005:54; El-Hage 2004:3–19), we cannot describe the experience of Christians using only the term "religious persecution." Obviously, "Christian" must be added in order to most accurately describe the expression of persecution on which the present study focuses.

More than this, we must understand "Christian" to mean "one who believes in, or professes or confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, or is assumed to believe in Jesus Christ …" (Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson 2001:655). This includes "Christians of all kinds" ("census Christians"), "affiliated Christians" ("member Christians"), "church attenders" ("practicing Christians"), and "Great Commission Christians" ("committed believers") (655, 651, 655, 662; Marshall 1998:4). The difference between these groups centres on the individual's level of commitment, and ranges from those who are Christian in name only to those who are actively involved in, and share their faith with, others. This understanding of "Christian" is important, for a perceived lack of commitment by a Christian ("Christians of all kinds") should not disqualify their experience of religious persecution. Neither should the perceived commitment of a Christian ("Great Commission Christian") necessarily glorify or substantiate their experience of persecution.

Finally, it is important to distinguish our definition of the religious persecution of Christians from socio-political definitions, like those described above. This is done by understanding our definition theologically (Boyd-MacMillan 2006:85ff). A theological definition of the religious persecution of Christians distinguishes itself by operating, in part, on a theological expectation of persecution. This expectation is a biblical principle whereby all Christians must anticipate persecution. We see this, for instance, in statements from Jesus and the Apostle Paul whereby those who choose to follow Christ must expect persecution (Jn 15:20; 2 Tm 3:12). Biblical statements like these are only accounted for in a theological definition.

Furthermore, on this third level, such a theological definition must also consider aspects of persecution that socio-political definitions, like those discussed above, do not. In this light, genocide, a socio-political part of persecution, becomes martyrdom in a

theological definition. Theologically, we must also go beyond the systematic or irregular presence of any violations of religious freedoms. We must even go beyond the presence of consistent discrimination. Thus a theological definition will also consider actions such as ostracism or ridicule as a part of persecution, and as an expected consequence of following Christ. These actions are not consistently discriminatory, and do not violate religious freedoms, yet when considered theologically, they are religious persecution. In this way, a theological definition of the religious persecution of Christians cannot separate actions of systematic violations from irregular ones, or from actions that do not violate religious freedoms at all.

To illustrate this point, consider the example of a young man who converts from the religion of his parents and family heritage to Christianity (Marshall 2000b:16). Upon doing so, this young man's parents ostracize him from his community and effectively disinherit him from his family. Considered from a socio-political perspective, however unfortunate this situation may be, it does not represent religious persecution. According to international standards, families are allowed to exercise such rights, unless the young man experienced any subsequent physical attack. Such would also be the case for a young girl who is ridiculed by schoolmates for being a Christian. Ridiculing someone is not illegal. Considered theologically, however, these actions do constitute religious persecution, regardless of whether they violate religious freedom or not. The actions of these hypothetical persecutors come as part of an expected consequence of following Christ. While their actions may not necessitate a reaction from the international community, when considered theologically, they require a response from the Church. Such a response may not be directed at the persecutors, but in support of, in these examples, the young man and the school girl. Likewise, these actions demand a theological understanding, and they demand a response from these Christians that may not be required in a socio-political understanding. Thus, the significance of a theological definition of the religious persecution of Christians forces certain examples of persecution to be considered, and to be responded to theologically, that a socio-political definition may not require.

Such a theological definition is important, because it acknowledges the full range in which persecution occurs, be it a systematic violation of religious freedom, an irregular violation, or an irregular,

unjust action that violates no religious freedoms (Boyd-MacMillan 2006:114, 115–116).

This theological consideration, its importance notwithstanding, does however make it nearly impossible to clearly identify areas where religious persecution may be a pervasive problem, and/or to classify areas in which religious freedoms are violated. For this reason, a socio-political definition of religious persecution can accompany a theological definition. While this may be helpful in terms of advocacy, awareness, and support, the presence of a theological definition on this third level must not be forgotten, for only when such a definition is present can we fully understand the religious persecution of Christians, and appropriately reflect on it theologically.

To this end, a theological definition of the religious persecution of Christians follows ("expanded definition"):

> Any unjust action of mild to intense levels of hostility, directed at Christians of varying levels of commitment, resulting in varying levels of harm, which may not necessarily prevent or limit these Christians' ability to practice their faith or appropriately propagate their faith as it is considered from the victim's perspective, each motivation having religion, namely the identification of its victims as "Christian," as its primary motivator.

For purposes of brevity, a "standard definition" understands 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, resulting in varying levels of harm as it is considered from the victim's perspective.

A helpful tension

This theological definition accounts for the full range in which persecution occurs. Yet this range can be difficult to accept, especially for those whose experience of persecution is frequent and intensely hostile. From their perspective, the rather comfortable position of some followers of Christ is hardly a testament of a persecuted Christian. With this in mind, we must clarify that the definition offered above is not meant to cheapen or glorify the experience of those who endure intensely hostile forms of persecution. Neither is it meant to deny the experience of those who endure mildly hostile forms of persecution. A tension exists, then, that may go some way towards filling in what appear to some as gaps between Christian discipleship

and the promised experience of persecution. With this in mind, we can observe that the presence of persecution is universal for all those who seek to follow Jesus Christ. However, even though the presence of persecution may be universal, it seems to be experienced differently by Christians, depending upon their context. In this way, persecution is experienced contextually, insofar as it takes place in different ways, depending on where it occurs and to whom.

The universal presence of persecution

As we noted in our theological definition of the religious persecution of Christians, the New Testament sets forth a theological expectation whereby Christians can anticipate persecution as a part of Christian living. This is what Jesus has in mind when he says, "All men will hate you because of me …" (Mt 10:22). In the same way, he warns, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (Jn 15:20). Paul echoes these sentiments when he tells Timothy, "… everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted …" (2 Tm 3:12). Peter, too, writes, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Pt 4:12). For Peter, expecting persecution meant not being surprised by its presence. Surely these words can apply to believers today, in the same way that they did to their biblical audiences. In fact, we are told that the Church and the Apostles before it stand in continuity with each other and with the Old Testament prophets, through the presence of persecution in their lives (Mt 5:11–12). Consequently, not only was persecution present in the lives of God's prophets, but it extends through time, as a promise and expectation for all those who seek to follow Christ. From this, we can surmise that the presence of the religious persecution of Christians is universal and ever-present. It cannot be relegated to a specific period, isolated to a specific location, or consigned to a certain group of people. Instead, its presence must be understood as universal not just chronologically, but geographically as well.

If this is so, then the question of normativity arises. If all Christians are persecuted, or are to expect persecution, how often will this occur? Do the biblical statements above indicate a daily experience? Surely, as Christ's own life, or that of any of the biblical characters illustrates, persecution is not necessarily a day-to-day experience. By not enduring it at any given moment, one need not

question the validity of one's discipleship. Persecution is to be an expected part of every Christian's life, not necessarily an expected part of every Christian's day.

This question of normativity may, however, be posed in a different manner. The late Jonathan Chao, like other Majority World Christians, wondered: "If [persecution] is an essential part of Christian union with Christ, which he intends us to experience, how do we explain the relative lack of [persecution] in churches in the rest of the world [the West]?" He continues: "… has the church in the West and the rest of the 'free world' been deprived of a training course on the way to glory?" (Chao 1984:88). In other words, is the idea of persecution as universally present, however biblical this might be, believable in today's world – a world divided by West and non-West; a culturally–conditioned church on one side, and one that seeks to exist amid tumultuousness on the other? If Scripture understands persecution as an integral part of Christian living and discipleship, are we then to think that the experience of the West and the Majority World is of comparable value? Such questions can only be answered – the universal presence of persecution can only be fully understood – by exploring the contextual experience of persecution.

The contextual experience of persecution

Even if the presence of persecution is universal, the experience of it takes place within a broad, albeit well defined spectrum of manifestations. So, while there may be many shared experiences of persecution throughout the world, persecution ultimately happens differently, depending on where it occurs and to whom. That is, persecution occurs in all areas, but how it is experienced becomes a matter of context. So, Chao's question, quoted above, might better be asked not by wondering *why* persecution apparently does not occur in a an area like the West, but by inquiring, "If persecution is an expected part of the Christian life, *how* does it occur in contexts where it does not appear to be as obvious as in other areas like the Majority World?" In other words, the answer to Chao's question may not be found in the presence or absence of persecution, but in reflecting upon the type of persecution endured in a specific context. If we apply the present study's theological definition of religious persecution to a context like the West, a critical eye can see that this context does indeed experience persecution, even if it is almost entirely mildly hostile and less apparent. Similarly, an examination of any cultural context should reveal a certain experience of

persecution. In this light, the contextual experience of persecution – the fact that it occurs differently in different areas – supports the concept that the presence of persecution is universal, and that it occurs to all Christians, however complex or diverse the experience of it might be.

Recognition of persecution as an experience occurring within specific contexts is important if we are to bring further recognition to the universal presence of persecution. In contexts where Christians are under significant pressure, or where it may even be illegal to fully practice their faith, persecution will often manifest itself in intensely hostile ways. Such is often not the case for Christians whose context looks more favorably on religion, specifically Christianity. In these contexts, persecution will most often manifest itself in mildly hostile ways. This is the case for many Christians in the West, where persecution is frequently a matter of discrimination or ridicule, which, understood theologically, can be seen as religious persecution. In this light, the experience of persecution is contextual, but the presence of persecution is universal.

Conclusion

If we are honest about the current state of theological reflection on religious persecution, we shall have to admit that, with few exceptions, the shortcomings we briefly describe at the beginning of our study suffer from malformed definitions of persecution. By offering a reconsidered definition of the event, we hope to correct these previous limitations.

In closing, it is perhaps worth reiterating here the care we hope to have demonstrated in placing religious persecution – intense and frequent for many, mild and infrequent for others – in the context of a theological expectation and a spectrum of hostility. In the same way, it is important to recognize here that those who might best be able to reflect theologically on religious persecution, and might best be able to fill in some of the gaps that do exist, may be the Majority World Christians who are most intimately familiar with persecution. It is often the case, though, that Christians in this position are unable, or, understandably, are unwilling to give reflection to their painful experiences. Nevertheless, may our study here stimulate more helpful reflection from a greater representation of the global Church. May it help those who experience persecution most frequently and intensely to respond to it with greater clarity and Christ-likeness, and may their cause be given more attention and support by those whose experience of persecution is infrequent and mild.

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