

Minding the gaps: Overcoming misconceptions of persecution

Charles L Tieszen*

Abstract

In this article, five misconceptions are surveyed that often attend to theological reflections on religious persecution. It will be argued that these misconceptions represent gaps in our perspectives of a proper theology of persecution and must be overcome if reflection is to adequately account for the way in which persecution occurs.

Keywords Persecution, eschatology, Early Church, Majority World, suffering, martyrdom.

Introduction

The amount of popular literature concerning itself with persecution is numerous. Yet when we pair this abundance with the number of works researched and published from a sound theological perspective, we are left with an apparent imbalance. Not only are theological reflections on persecution few in number, but as the author seeks to demonstrate in the present study, it is often the case that when authors do reflect theologically upon persecution, they tend to do so in a manner which is rather underdeveloped. Of course, works, the purpose of which is to survey a particular persecution situation or relate the experiences of their persecuted authors, are plentiful. Indeed, it is possible for narrative such as this to function as theology, but we must still wonder if it can suffice when it comes to the pressing need for robust theologies of persecution.

* The author (*1978) graduated from Simpson University in Redding, California. He is also a graduate of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts and a former research assistant at the seminary's Center for the Study of Global Christianity. He is presently a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Birmingham, UK. The article is an adaptation for this journal of the first part of Charles Tieszen's book *Re-examining religious persecution: Constructing a framework for understanding persecution* (Kempston Park: AcadSA Publishing, 2008). E-mail: tieszen@gmail.com.

In the end, for all of the literature devoted to some aspect of religious persecution, the lack of sound theological reflection gives way to gaps between malformed thoughts. If we are to reflect accurately on religious persecution we must be mindful of these gaps as we seek to overcome the build-up of misconceptions and faulty thinking. As a starting point for such efforts, the areas in which theological reflection has perhaps fallen short are pointed out. In minding these gaps, future theological reflection may perhaps be more thorough and effective.

Is persecution only an eschatological experience?

To begin with, the works that view persecution as an event only manifesting itself in the period of time nearest to the Eschaton, are examined. Works like these often acknowledge occurrences of persecution during various periods in Christian history, but these are ultimately interpreted by pointing in some way to Christ's Second Coming and the accompanying events.

For instance, at the close of the last century Larry Poland (1990:41) asserted in his book *The coming persecution* that, “[h]ere at the end of the century ... there is a convergence of dynamics which, *for the first time ever*, has prepared the world for the fulfilment of the final fifth of God's revealed scenarios” (emphasis in original). Essentially, what Scripture has foretold for the future is this generation's present scenario (Poland 43 57). Poland goes on to say that the increasing evil in the world is unprecedented. Similarly, the increasing presence of famine, earthquakes, warfare, false messiahs, and “uniformitarian thinking” (scoffing at the Bible and its relation to history, science, etc.) can only be understood as “labour pains” that Christ himself foretold (Poland 1990:53 56; 43 125). The “labour pains” Poland speaks of, which include various forms of persecution, point to an imminent period of intense persecution. All of this, according to Poland, is a part of Satan's strategy in the final phase of earthly, human history (Poland :127 143). At this time, believers in Christ, under the strain of persecution, will cry out to God for deliverance, marking the advent of Christ's Second Coming.

Hal Lindsey (1970), author of the popular work *The late great planet earth*, shares Poland's view of a world growing in evil in direct fulfilment of biblical prophecy. According to Lindsey, these events are followed by a period known as the Great Tribulation. In a later work, Lindsey (1994:269) details the events prior to this period and writes:

“... the world seems poised on the brink of a period of bigotry and persecution unparalleled since the days of the early church.” He goes on to cite examples of persecution in the United States stemming from liberalism, humanism, Hollywood’s poor treatments of religion, a biased media, and society’s overall hatred of traditional Christianity (Lindsey 1994:272 277). These, along with more severe circumstances around the globe, are a part of a coming persecution, part of the “end-times” activity that Scripture has foretold. Lindsay (1994:279) concludes, “... for those of us living in this world today as we approach an age of growing persecution, there’s something else to look forward to. For God promises that he will take His flock out of this world just before the persecution becomes most unbearable.”

For Poland, Lindsey, and others like them, the persecution of Christians is an event that ultimately finds itself in the period of time nearest to the Eschaton. Persecution that is occurring presently is seen only as “labour pains” and as a signpost for things to come. So, while proponents of this view may acknowledge occurrences of persecution here and there, it is ultimately an eschatological event. Persecution that occurs before the Eschaton merely points to this final period. Viewing persecution in this manner leaves Christians in the West, where this view is most common, unable to see and respond to their present experience of persecution. They are only able to think of it in terms of a violent event that is yet to come. Thus, they are seemingly unaware of the non-violent and less apparent occurrences of persecution that they themselves endure. If Christians are unwilling to acknowledge the current presence of persecution, they are often unable to appropriately respond to and reflect on it.

Moreover, the religious persecution of Christians, acknowledged, but viewed only as an eschatological experience, effectively minimizes the Early Church’s experience of persecution and the generations of believers thereafter. As the works of Poland and Lindsay demonstrate, any occurrence of persecution is equated with “end-times” activity. Thus, even persecution occurring before the future Great Tribulation is interpreted in terms of Christ’s return and the Church’s place in that event (Poland 1990:158 174). These are merely experiences that precede this generation’s “labour pains,” which themselves point to the experience of great persecution that matters most. The fact remains that Christians have been persecuted since the inception of the Church, which has seen persecution

situations of greater or lesser degrees throughout its history. One cannot deny the present and historical experiences of the Church and thus see persecution only in the light of the Eschaton.

Adding to this misguided thinking are those whose view of eschatology allows for a pre-tribulation rapture. Here, believers are taken up to meet Christ before the time of great persecution on earth. Paul Marshall (1997:159) effectively labels this view “The Great Escape”. It contributes to the idea that there is a period of persecution coming, but not yet here. Before it comes though, believers in Christ will be spared. Christians who depend on this escape are left not only unaware of their own experience of persecution, but even worse, they are simply unaware of the intense persecution that occurs in many areas of the Majority World. Believers in these regions must wonder then, where is our “Great Escape”? If persecution is an eschatological event that Christians can avoid, there is no incentive to deal with what is presently occurring in any part of the world. At most, present persecution points to Christ’s Second Coming and will only hasten his return.

In the end, seeing persecution only as an eschatological event forces Christians to deny their current experience, interpret it only in terms of the Eschaton, and/or view persecution as a future event that they will be spared from. This, in essence, leaves Christians preparing for an experience that is yet to come, instead of giving theological reflection to something that is an expected part of their Christian discipleship in the here-and-now. Christians who hold this perspective are effectively left without the ability to understand and respond to an experience that should be a part of everyday Christian living, both in the West and the Majority World, not just something that may or may not point to the future (Hoekema 1979:150 151).

Is persecution only an isolated historical experience?

While various scholars view persecution as a future event, others view it as only occurring within a specific period of history. Ugandan theologian Dan Kyanda (1979:98) refers to this view as the “historical exemption” in light of the opinion of some that persecution simply “doesn’t happen anymore.” Instead, such Christians believe that religious persecution was carried out only against the Early Church and all but ended with Constantine and the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. (Schirmacher 2001:25 27).

The story of persecution prior to the fourth century is indeed familiar to many Christians. These events began in Jerusalem and essentially followed the Church as they spread throughout the Roman Empire. As the number of cases of persecution grew during and subsequent to this time, Christianity took on an increasing majority role. Following the Edict of Milan and Theodosius' rule, declaring Christianity the Empire's official religion in 380 A.D., intense persecution became much less frequent. With the rise of Christendom, the story of Christianity as a minority and suppressed religion became a dominant force in the Western world. For those familiar only with this story, persecution is merely an isolated historical experience.

What is less well known, is the intense persecution that continued to occur before, during, and beyond Constantine on the fringes of the Empire and outside it. In Persia, for instance, Christians who found refuge from Roman persecution began to experience it from the Sassanians touting Zoroastrianism as the national religion (Moffett 1992:106). While these initial outbreaks were fairly minor, they began to grow in intensity (106-109). As Moffett remarks, "[f]aced with what seemed to be a double threat, a threat not only to national security but to the national religion as well, Persia's priests and rulers cemented their alliance of state and religion in a series of periods of terror that have been called the most massive persecution of Christians in history..." (Moffett 1992:138).

Stories like these seem to escape the minds of many Christians, often those from the West. For these individuals, their knowledge of history and the Church moves westward with Constantine. Accordingly, their knowledge of a Church that is intimately acquainted with persecution is minimal. Consequently, the idea that Christians continued to be persecuted after the Church's first three centuries and throughout the world today is a surprise. Nina Shea (1997:5) concurs, writing, "[m]ost Westerners are shocked to learn that Christians are still being persecuted throughout the world" and Marshall (1997:xxii) adds that persecution, "... may in the comfortable worlds of western Christians seem more suited to biblical texts and ancient Roman history than to evening newscasts, more a product of mission-board puffery than hard fact." Thus, despite a consistent presence of persecution throughout history and even today, many Christians simply remain unaware of it (xxii).

This unawareness may in fact be the result of an inadequate definition of persecution. If Christians understand persecution only to be violent, physical acts, then they tend to associate such events with a specific period of history, namely the Early Church. This is because these Christians, mostly coming from the West, do not see such violent acts in their own society. Marshall adds that additional reasons for this lack of knowledge, including a Western theology that stresses success, prosperity, and inner peace, a nationalist form of Christianity that confuses God and state, lack of information, and, as was noted above, an obsession with end-times prophecy (Marshall 1997:152). Shea adds that this unawareness is also the natural result of a lack of attention by influential groups like media, the fact that many intensely persecuted Christians do not tell their story because it is a part of everyday life and/or for fear of retribution, and even an intentional disregard for acts of persecution (Shea 1997:13 16; 17 24). A division between Western and Majority World Christians, such that Westerners are unable to identify with a faith that deals with such severe threats on a daily basis, could also be noted as a reason behind unawareness of persecution.

In the end, viewing persecution as an isolated historical experience, having occurred only in the Early Church, denies the experience of Christians living from the fourth century onward. Likewise, it denies the experience of many of those living in the Majority World, Christians who often live with the daily threat of intense forms of persecution. Stemming from this, Western Christians are themselves confused about the presence of persecution in their own societies. As a result, theological reflection is severely hampered at a time when it is greatly needed.

Is persecution only the experience of Majority World Christians?

Other viewpoints see religious persecution as only the experience of Christians living in the Majority World. In these regions, many Christians do indeed live with the daily threat of intense persecution. This type of experience is rarely seen by Western Christians within their own societies which are generally tolerant of religions. Thus, due to the absence of this far more apparent type of persecution, it is said by proponents of this viewpoint that this is not the experience of

Western Christians, but rather, that it only occurs within Majority World Christianity.

In his book *Called to suffer, called to triumph*, Herbert Schlossberg (1990:237) closes his work by saying, “[t]hose who do not go through it [persecution] are part of the fortunate few. They should ... seek to ... help those whose experience is closer to the norm.” According to Schlossberg (1990:15; 20; 21), persecution is subject to the ebb and flow of time. It occurs in a certain place at a certain moment. Then, as conditions change, persecution will shift to another area, perhaps at a different period of time. For Schlossberg (1990:20), the history of persecution gives evidence of it, “... arising, then cooling off, and then coming to life again.” Using case studies, Schlossberg hopes to illustrate that it is presently areas such as Asia, Africa, and the former Soviet Union that are, or at least were at the close of the last century, the current stage of religious persecution. Thus, for Schlossberg, religious persecution of Christians is, at the present moment, only the experience of Majority World Christians.

Brother Andrew (1979:17) displays similar views in his work *Destined to suffer?* He writes early on that, “[persecution] ... has already come, gradually or suddenly, upon ... half of the ... Body of Christ.” He goes on to assert that persecution has yet to come to the West. It is an experience that will confront this area eventually, but for now, it is only the experience of those in the Majority World (Brother Andrew 1979:51). Like Schlossberg, then, the persecution that Brother Andrew has in mind occurs in certain areas whilst it is absent from others. It is thus only the present experience of Majority World Christians.

In similar fashion, Scott Cunningham (1977:340) demonstrates this perspective when he writes that the Church of the West is quite distant from a theology and experience that has religious persecution at its core. Accordingly, “... the North American Christian may neither experience persecution nor be aware that others do ...” (Cunningham 1977:341). For Cunningham, persecution is the very real and everyday experience of Christians in the Majority World. Consequently, they are able to apply the lessons of the very Early Church to their own situations. Much more, they are better able to respond to their experience. As for the West, Cunningham is admittedly confused as to the appropriate biblical application. For him, a theology which

addresses persecution, must surely be, "...troubling to Western believers who, perhaps because they have become culturally acceptable, know nothing of that experience" (Cunningham 1977:342). Once again, persecution is seen as the experience of only Majority World Christians.

This viewpoint stems from similar misconceptions described above. As noted earlier, Christians who see persecution only as an isolated historical experience are not only unaware of present circumstances and Church history, but they are also confused concerning an appropriate definition of persecution. Furthermore, some Christians, many being from the West, associate persecution with violent acts. When they do not see this violence against religion occur in their own society, they often associate it with a specific period of history. Likewise, Christians who acknowledge the presence of persecution in the contemporary world, but operate from a similar definition, often understand persecution as being only the experience of Majority World Christianity, for in their minds this is where violent and physical persecution is most prevalent.

All three authors surveyed in this section, the positive contributions of their work notwithstanding, demonstrate this very confusion. While Schlossberg (1990:17) acknowledges a range of types of persecution, he only cites examples of intense persecution and/or significant religious restriction which occur in the Majority World. In fact, he acknowledges a difference in how the term is used. While mentioning persecution to a pastor in what is now the Czech Republic, he was told that Christians in that area were not persecuted. This was because these Christians did not experience "... beatings, imprisonment, and being put to death" However, as Schlossberg (1990:17) soon discovered, these Christians had to take a significant number of precautions to ensure the safety and secrecy of their worship services. Brother Andrew and Cunningham seem to understand persecution in similarly truncated ways (Brother Andrew 1974:23; Cunningham 1977:340 342). As this author understands it, persecution is 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 (Tieszen 2008). Understood theologically, the experience of Western Christians, albeit much less physically violent,

is in agreement with such a definition. Thus, their experience can be understood as religious persecution.

The inadequacy of this third misconception is further demonstrated in qualitative statements that contradict biblical evidence. As Schlossberg (1990:237) writes, “[p]ersecution is part of the normal Christian experience, a consequence of the desire to follow Christ with faithfulness.” Brother Andrew agrees, citing Scripture throughout that assures those who truly seek to follow Christ in the experience of religious persecution (Brother Andrew 1979:3). Cunningham (1977:341) writes, “Christians should expect persecution as an integral part of discipleship”, based on his own biblical theology of the event. Even so, elsewhere he insists that the Church of the West knows nothing of this experience. In fact, he ponders the relationship of a lack of discipleship with that of a lack of persecution (Cunningham 1977:342). Thus, even though each author acknowledges the biblical perspective that every Christian will experience persecution, they see only a specific population of the Church enduring it. In essence, each author raises contradictory issues when it comes to their view that persecution only occurs in the Majority World.

Is persecution the same as suffering in general?

The authors of *Joy through the night* (Spencer and Spencer 1994:19) demonstrate another misconception when they equate general suffering with persecution. Early on in their work, they outline four biblical categories through which suffering might be explained. Persecution, an aspect of “advancing God’s reign,” is one of them. In this light, persecution is understood to occur as a result of “... further[ing] God’s rule over this wicked and rebellious world” (Spencer and Spencer 1994:19). The authors add that persecution stems from evil, and thus, the death of one of the author’s family members is seen as a type of persecution (76). They also distinguish between “life-threatening” persecution, which they attribute to the Early Church, and “everyday” persecution. This, the authors connect with such experiences as losing one’s car to theft, being harassed by motorists on the street, and being treated as a second-class citizen based on the location of one’s residence (77 78). For these authors, there seems to be no major distinction between intense religious

persecution and unfortunate circumstances, other than the level of threat it imposes. It seems that they mistake their suffering for religious persecution.

In similar fashion, there are those who set out to treat the subject of suffering, but in doing so, misinterpret what is actually meant by religious persecution. Douglas John Hall, in his book *God and human suffering*, astutely examines the subject of suffering and how Christians might respond to and interact with it. Yet he states that “[t]here is more about the suffering of the church in the newer Testament’s writings than about any other single ecclesiastical theme. Not only is the suffering of the church [sic] the specific motif of whole documents ... but it looms large in all the literature of the newer Testament” (Hall 1986:123). With this statement Hall displays a curious blurring of lines between general suffering and religious persecution. Joel Williams is perhaps more accurate when he writes, “[p]ersecution is an aspect ... that is a prominent theme in the New Testament ...” (Larkin and Williams 1998:245). Seen in this light, it seems that Hall mistakes religious persecution for suffering in general.

With these two examples in mind, it is apparent that the distinctions between suffering and religious persecution in particular are rather fine. Even so, it seems clear that there is a need to distinguish between the two. To that end, while those who are persecuted suffer, those who suffer are not necessarily persecuted. While in a sense it is true that the source of religious persecution is evil and the Evil One, as Spencer and Spencer assert above, it is also true that the source of suffering for all humankind is ultimately the Evil One in a fallen world. In other words, Satan directs his evil at all of humankind, regardless of their religious persuasion. So, to think of suffering and persecution as the same event merely because they originate from the same source is not fully correct (Spencer and Spencer 1994:75). Furthermore, attributing to suffering what is best understood as persecution effectively downplays the presence of religious persecution. In societies where religious persecution is less apparent there is a tendency to view it or apply biblical texts relating to it to situations that in reality should not be understood in such terms (Penner 2004:8 9). As Glenn Penner points out, “[b]ecause the biblical texts on persecution cannot be readily applied to a setting where there is [less apparent] ... persecution, the tendency seems to be ... to misapply these passages to situations of general physical,

psychological, and spiritual suffering” (Penner 2004:8; Schirrmacher 2001:29ff.). Thus, in situations where the nature and definition of persecution are confused, its significance and the ability of Christians to appropriately respond to it are minimized.

Is persecution the same as martyrdom?

Finally, there are those whose views connect martyrdom and religious persecution so closely that the former is effectively emphasised at the expense of the latter. To be true, there is indeed a close relationship between the two. If one is martyred, it is because he or she was persecuted in such a way as to result in death. In other words, a martyr’s experience preceding his or her death is understood as religious persecution. It is the actual death of an individual that qualifies them as a martyr. Thus, one cannot experience martyrdom apart from his or her experience of persecution.

This close connection is helpful in a variety of ways. For instance, martyrdom is usually a specific event in time that is often recorded, or at least has the potential to be easily recorded. In this light, martyrdom provides the simplest way in which to quantify not only martyrs, but the presence of persecution as well. Such statistics are helpful in providing a fuller understanding of the Church’s experience of persecution and martyrdom. These statistics help us realise that Christian martyrdom has seen a steady increase since the Church’s beginning, it is not just the experience of one particular era. From this we can make similar conclusions regarding the persecution of Christians as a direct result of its close relationship with martyrdom.

Yet the fact remains that even though one cannot be martyred without being persecuted, one can be persecuted without being martyred. Consequently, if focus is given only to martyrdom, without setting any specific parameters, the experience of those who are persecuted, but not killed, is neglected. It is this aspect of persecution that is often overrun by overemphasizing the close relationship between martyrdom and persecution (Boyd-MacMillan 2006:21 22).

This oversight often occurs in efforts to survey the presence of persecution. For example, the authors of *By their Blood* (Hefley and Hefley 1979:589), a book meant to extend the work of Foxe’s Book of Martyrs, seem to equate persecution with martyrdom when they wrote

before the close of the twentieth century, "... another edition of this book may include martyrs in the 1980s and 1990s from countries which have not yet been torn by religious persecution. Christians in nations which have religious freedom now should thank God every day for this blessing which is denied their brothers and sisters elsewhere." They seem to suggest that where there is persecution there is, or will be, martyrdom, yet as was clarified above, this is simply not always the case.

Conclusion

The five categories presented above illustrate gaps and truncated thinking when it comes to many theological treatments of religious persecution, treatments which are admittedly few in number. More than this, they illustrate that where such gaps exist, our theological reflections are misguided and severely hampered. While viewing persecution as an eschatological experience does draw attention to the hope found in Christ's return (Pobee 1985:101; 110-118), it does not adequately deal with the consistent experience of Christians in every era of the Church's history. Viewing persecution as an isolated historical experience, particularly that of the Early Church, acknowledges the events of the past, but it does not acknowledge the persecution that occurs in the present. Furthermore, where persecution is viewed as only occurring during the Church's first three centuries, we see a lack of knowledge of the exact nature of persecution. Acknowledging the experience of Majority World Christians brings the presence of persecution out from the confines of the Early Church to the place and time when it is at its worst. This awareness is greatly needed, but not at the expense of confusing the nature of persecution that also exists in the West in addition to contradicting biblical statements. If persecution is viewed alongside or within general human suffering we see additional confusion and minimization of the experience of religious persecution. Finally, viewing persecution as martyrdom effectively minimizes the experience of Christians who do not die for their faith, but live with persecution. Using martyrdom to illustrate the presence of persecution or to quantify it does not justify an inappropriate conjoining of the two experiences. With these misconceptions in mind, we are left with a road to a theology of persecution that is marked by significant gaps.

It can be said that those who might best be able to fill in these gaps are those whose experience of persecution is most intimate. However, because of the intensely hostile nature of their persecution, they are often unable to devote significant time to thinking, writing, and sharing their reflections. In this light, perhaps these Christians can be excused for the lack of theological attention persecution receives. The rest of the Church, however, cannot be excused even if their experience, whether they acknowledge it or not, is of only mildly hostile forms of persecution. Perhaps the study above can in some way serve as a call to Christians, especially those most familiar with persecution to offer their theological reflections and for those who are less acquainted with persecution to support the former in their endeavour.

References

- Boyd-MacMillan, R 2006. *Faith that endures: The essential guide to the persecuted church*. Grand Rapids: Revell.
- Brother Andrew (ed.) 1979. *Destined to suffer?* Orange: Open Doors with Brother Andrew.
- Cunningham, Scott 1977: “*Through many tribulations*”: *The theology of persecution in Luke Acts*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Hall, Douglas J 1986. *God and human suffering*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House.
- Hefley, J and Hefley, M 1979. *By their blood*. Milford: Mott Media.
- Hoekema, AA 1979. *The Bible and the future*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Kyanda, Dan 1979. “The Attitude of the Prepared Christian,” in *Destined to suffer?*, edited by Brother Andrew. Orange: Open Doors with Brother Andrew, Inc.: 97-104.
- Larkin, WJ Jr., and Williams, Joel F. (eds). 1998. *Mission in the New Testament*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Lindsey, Hal 1970. *The late great planet earth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House.
- Lindsey, Hal 1994. *Planet earth 2000 A.D.* Palos Verdes: Western Front.
- Marshall, Paul 1997. *Their blood cries out*. Dallas: Word Publishing.
- Moffett, SH 1992. *A history of Christianity in Asia, Vol 1, Beginnings to 1500*. San Francisco: Harper Collins.

- Penner, Glenn 2004. *In the shadow of the cross: A biblical theology of persecution and discipleship*. Bartlesville: Living Sacrifice Books.
- Pobee, JS 1985. *Persecution and martyrdom in the theology of Paul*. Sheffield: JSOT Press.
- Poland, Larry W 1990. *The coming persecution*. San Bernadino: Here's Life Publishers.
- Schirmacher, Thomas 2001. *The persecution of Christians concerns us all*. Bonn: idea/VKW.
- Schlossberg, Herbert 1990. *Called to suffer, called to triumph*. Portland: Multnomah Press.
- Shea, Nina 1997. *In the lion's den*. Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers.
- Spencer, AB and WD Spencer 1994. *Joy through the night: Biblical resources for suffering people*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
- Tieszen, Charles L 2008. *Re-examining religious persecution: Constructing a framework for understanding persecution*. Kempton Park: AcadSA Publishing.