

Wishing for persecution?

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Abstract

This article identifies four myths associated with the wishing for persecution that is frequently a part of North American evangelicalism. The argument developed is that besides being naïve and completely out-of-touch with the reality of persecution, wishing for persecution is unbiblical. What is even more sobering is that the history of Christianity indicates that the arrival of persecution could be a disaster and lead to the church's complete eradication in a particular geographical region.

Keywords Evangelicalism (North American), persecution, church growth, early church, martyrdom.

There is glee among some North American Christians over the demise of Christendom that is striking for its naivety (Hauerwas & Willimon 1989:18). What is particularly perplexing is when some look forward to the persecution that so often follows disestablishment, or even long for what persecuted Christians in other parts of the world are experiencing. The ones most prone to such zeal are evangelical Protestants,¹ a Christian subculture with its own forms of often

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¹ The most commonly accepted description of the evangelicalism that has its origins in eighteenth-century Britain is that it is a movement marked by four characteristics: Conversionism (a stress on the New Birth); Activism (an energetic, individualistic approach to religious duties and social involvement); Biblicism (a reliance on the Bible as ultimate religious authority); and Crucicentrism (a focus on Christ's redeeming work as the heart of essential Christianity). See Bebbington 1989.

contradictory and paradoxical popular religion (Jorstad 1993).² For instance, internationally recognized American evangelical preacher John MacArthur declared: “There is nothing negative about persecution. It is a positive thing... It is victorious for us to endure persecution. It causes us to grow, receive blessing, and have joy.”³ Such positive descriptions of persecution can be found in evangelical music, blogs, and other forms of popular religion, as well as sermons. But should such Christians in America be so enthusiastic about – or wish for – persecution? I say no, for such popular level excitement for persecution is rooted in four myths.⁴

Myth #1: Persecution can be handled

While seekers of persecution often recount examples of faith and bravery exemplified in the lives of saints who zealously went to their deaths in the coliseums of Rome, they often forget that numerous early Christians succumbed to the pressure and denied Christ. Perhaps the most well-known example from the New Testament of such bravado in the face of danger is that of Peter, one of the twelve disciples. Peter declared twice that he would remain loyal to Christ, even in the face of death. When the moment of crisis arrived, however, Peter denied Christ, not once, but three times. The evidence for numerous other lapsed Christians is clear and compelling. Tertullian, Origen, and Lactantius all noted how the local Roman magistrates rejoiced when Christians recanted (Tertullian: 2; Origen: 8.44; Lactantius: 5.11). Cyprian lamented the numbers of Christians who succumbed to the pressure (Cyprian), and Eusebius wrote a sobering account of the lapsed during the reign of Diocletian (Eusebius: 8:3).

What needs to be considered when reading about the zeal of the martyrs is that many early Christians were wary of seeking after persecution. The early church learned quite quickly that those who sought after it were usually the ones unable to stand it. For instance, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* includes a story about a man named Quintas that illustrates the danger of seeking after persecution (*Martyrdom*: 4).

² For more information on the extent, role and power of popular religion among evangelicals, see Jorstad 1993.

³ <http://www.biblebb.com/files/mac/sg1715.htm> (accessed June 2010).

⁴ For a helpful discussion of five other contemporary misconceptions of persecution, see Tieszen 2009b.

Myth #2: Persecution is romantic

The zeal with which some want persecution is reminiscent of recruits in the opening days of the First World War who celebrated the outbreak of hostilities. Those young recruits, so excited about marching off to battle, were indoctrinated with romantic images of soldiers going off to fight a glorious and noble war. Of course, their visions of war belonged to a world of fantasy, not the real world of trenches, gas, artillery, machine guns and rotting flesh. That was the point of Wilfred Owen (WWI soldier) in his anti-war poem *Dulce et Decorum Est*.

As Charles Tieszen notes, persecution can range from “mild to intense levels of hostility” (Tieszen 2008a: 48). And while there are less violent forms of persecution such as economic penalties or travel restrictions, persecution is often a very bloody affair. Beatings, rape and devilish tortures go hand-in-hand with much persecution, but such horrors are often glossed over by those wishing for persecution.

Christian identity has been “indelibly marked by the collective memory of the religious suffering of others” (Castelli 2004: 4), and accounts such as the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, *Martyrdom of Perpetua*, and other early Christian martyrdoms played a central role in the development of such a collective memory. While many of the martyrdom accounts that shaped Christian identity were vivid descriptions of violence, because of the eventual success of the church over its pagan opponents, and through the “process of continual commemoration”, the stories eventually morphed from a bloody account of human suffering to a “pious and uplifting spectacle” of God’s victory over Satan’s power (Castelli 2004: 125).⁵ The focus shifted from the blood shed to the faith exhibited, and from the violence perpetrated to the victory gained.

The nature of hagiographic writings was to inspire faith and shape conduct (even at the expense of historical accuracy), and this pattern continued in the centuries that followed. The instructional value of such works seems obvious, but the danger is that they create and perpetuate myths regarding the nature of persecution that are simply not true, nor adequately prepare people for the real bloody thing. Persecution needs to be seen as it really is – bloody, painful, and a tragedy. Any description of it that glosses over or idealizes it is a lie.

⁵ For a helpful work on the development of Christian identity and ideals of martyrdom, see Leemans 2005.

Myth #3: Persecution automatically brings numerical growth

The North African church father Tertullian stated to the Roman authorities: “Your most refined cruelties are to no purpose. We become more numerous each time you reap: the blood of the martyrs is a seed” (Tertullian: 50). But was Tertullian right? Does persecution always lead to numerical growth?

I have surveyed elsewhere in more detail the places where Christianity has been virtually wiped out (Heath 2011). Philip Jenkins has also recently identified the regions where Christianity has been eliminated (Jenkins 2008). Suffice it to say here that persecution has often been quite effective in destroying the church in a specific region. Of course, there are places where the church survived brutal persecution or legal restriction: Tertullian’s North Africa experience is one example. Other examples are the Coptic Church in Egypt, the Russian Orthodox Church under communist rule, or the present-day “underground” church in China. These and other accounts are success stories of churches that did not die. Nevertheless, not all stories have such happy endings. The churches in Nubia (modern-day Sudan), Central Asia, China, and Japan all suffered profound losses as a result of persecution. In the case of China, the church was wiped out twice in the medieval period. Even today, Christian communities such as those in Indonesia or Orissa (India) are in danger of being systematically persecuted and eliminated. Ironically, even Tertullian’s North African church did not survive the Arab invasions of the seventh and eighth centuries.

The elimination of these once dynamic communities is sobering. Vast swaths of land in Africa and Asia, that at one time had a numerically significant indigenous Christian presence, are now devoid of any sizeable indigenous Christian presence.⁶ Through genocide, persecution, forced migration and other factors, regions that once contained millions of Christians now contain – at best – a handful.

⁶ I am thinking of Asia Minor/Turkey (once the heartland of Christianity, now approx. 99% Muslim) as one example. Perhaps the Nestorian churches in central Asia would be another example of Christianity taking a serious blow in regards to numbers, visibility, and even presence. African examples would be North Africa (yes, there are some Christians, but any visible indigenous presence such as was in the 4-7th centuries has been eliminated), or Nubia (in today’s Upper Egypt and Sudan) that at one time had Christianity as the established religion and a vibrant church.

While some North American evangelicals wish for persecution to purify the church, grow it, and then restore it to its previous cultural dominance, they are sorely mistaken: a quick study of the church's history reveals that persecution does not automatically bring about numerical growth.

Jesus did say to his followers, "If they persecute me, they will persecute you" (John 15:20), and the Apostle Paul indicated that Christians would experience persecution: "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim 3:12). But note that neither Jesus nor Paul said that they would necessarily survive it. The New Testament does indicate that the global church will not be wiped out before Jesus' return, but it makes no promises about the survival of every church in every geographical region.

Myth #4: It is biblical to wish for persecution

It is beyond the scope of this brief article to provide an exegesis of every biblical passage that relates to persecution, nor even provide a detailed summary of the New Testament passages. Suffice it to say, the New Testament makes it clear that Jesus' followers should expect persecution. Jesus said, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:20). Paul wrote "everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim 3:12), and he invited Christians to join with him in suffering for the gospel (2 Tim 1:8). Peter stated that Christians were called to suffering, since they were following his example (1 Pet 2:19-21), and that persecution was an identification with Christ in his sufferings (1 Pet 4:1-6). The book of Acts shows that Christians repeatedly faced persecution, and the book of Revelation shows that Christians are locked in a cosmic battle that means martyrdom will be a reality for many. But there is nothing that indicates that Christians are to wish for persecution, or seek it out. In fact, the examples of persecution indicate the exact opposite.

There are many New Testament examples of Christians fleeing persecution, or hiding from it. Jesus expected his followers to flee persecution (Matt 25:16-20), Jesus walked away from persecution (Luke 4:28-30), the early church fled persecution (Acts 8:1-4), Paul fled from potential persecution (Acts 9:23-25), Paul and Barnabas fled from potential persecution (Acts 14:4-7), Paul and Silas hid from persecutors (Acts 17:10), and Peter (Acts 12) and Paul and Silas (Acts

16) did not stick around when God broke them out of prison. Paul's Christian convictions did not mean that he had to take mistreatment. In fact, Paul claimed his rights as a Roman citizen in order to gain protection or a fair hearing (Acts 22, 25-28). There are certainly many examples of persecution, and in many cases it seems that it was unavoidable. When it did come, and they could not escape, they were to stand firm. However, they did not seek it out. There are also numerous examples from the early church of Christians fleeing persecution. In regards to voluntarily giving oneself up to the authorities for martyrdom, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* states, "We are not taught anything of that kind in the Gospel" (*Martyrdom*: 4).⁷

The error of wishing for persecution seems to reside in a blurring of biblical teachings. On the one hand, there is the recognition that some type of spiritual blessing comes from persecution (Matt 5:10-12), that God in his sovereignty uses persecution for his purposes, that persecution may bring about numerical church growth, and that Christians should expect persecution. On the other hand, all that is not to say that Christians should seek it out or wish for it. If it comes and cannot be avoided, then suffer. But if it does not come, do not wish for it or bring it about. Christians need to think carefully about what the Bible teaches, and not make a sloppy connection between the former biblical realities, and the latter distortion of it.

Conclusion

North American Christians live in unsettling times – the rapidly changing religious landscape makes it look to some like persecution is on its way. Whether or not it is can be debated, but what should not be debated is wishing for it. Besides being naïve and completely out-of-touch with the reality of persecution, wishing for persecution is unbiblical. What is even more sobering is that the history of Christianity indicates that the arrival of persecution could be a disaster and lead to the church's complete eradication in a particular region or continent. In other words, be careful what you wish for.

⁷ While there were still those who sought after martyrdom, the church authorities generally condemned such practice.

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