



Issue 3: Persecution and Suffering

Issue of May 2017

Persecution is no stranger to IFES. Asking for names of people who could write on the topic, the list of names kept growing of people from student movements who are experiencing persecution and suffering today.

There is hope for the persecuted.

‘If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you’, Jesus makes plain to his disciplines (John 15:20). He then offers them a promise: ‘When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness’ (15:26–27). Or, reflecting the Greek word, ‘you also will be martyrs’. So, the persecuted participate in the life of the triune God, in the Son’s persecution and the Spirit’s witness.

There is hope, too, for persecutors.

The Apostle Paul persecuted the Way, but he joined that Way and faced beatings, attacks, imprisonment, shipwreck, and danger. He was able to teach, ‘Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them’ (Romans 12:14).

Many writers in this issue face persecution. An Iraqi Christian forced to flee to Kurdish-held areas, **Nazek Matty OP** laments how ISIS has disrupted the traditions of an ancient Christian community. The Archbishop of Jos in Nigeria, **Benjamin Kwashi**, links Christian suffering with the cross of Christ. From Gabon, **Nesmy Bersot Mvé Nguéma** writes about being persecuted because of taking a stand for justice.

The death of martyrs is not glorious but awful and lonely, writes **Michael P Jensen**, but this is the pattern of Jesus' death. **Matthew J Thomas** links the suffering of Christians today to those of the early Church—suffering with Christ and serving as a proof of God's presence.

In response to persecution, **Hwa Yung** suggests that in the face of mass violence, Christians must move beyond faithful endurance to consider the just defence of communities. In response to the suffering of many in the Middle East, **Yohanna Katanacho** invites tears and lament. Where there is no hope, he points to a better hope.

Reading these articles may bring you to tears—but may they also bring hope.



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Join the conversation about persecution and suffering

Word & World is designed to start theological conversations about global issues. Each issue comes with a set of discussion questions to be used in groups.

Find out more about *Word & World*, a publication of IFES.

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The threat to Christian identity in Iraq

What happens when people are forced from their ancient homeland?

Nazek Matty OP

The term 'persecution' and its definition are known to most Christians. Christians suffered persecution since their first formation as a community. And, through history, Christians in different places in the world experienced direct persecution that came in different forms. So, to tell the truth, being persecuted because I am a Christian is not something that comes as a surprise. Hearing about persecution, we also learn about some courageous people who keep their faith and are ready to die for it. The fact that these people are so faithful is something extraordinary. Yet, it is sad that at this time of freedom and modernity, there are people who are persecuted because of their faith.

Being killed or murdered because of faith is brutal. But in my view, that is not the ugliest thing that persecution could end with. There is another aspect of persecution that could be as devastating as murder as a means of erasing individuals as well as groups of people.

In fact, what is most dangerous about persecution is not threatening someone's life, but rather threatening someone's faith. Therefore, speaking about the persecution of Christians in Iraq, in what follows I will focus on how persecution by the so-called Islamic State is threatening our Christian identity, one intimately connected with a certain community and a certain place.

Many have heard about what happened in Iraq in August 2014. ISIS invaded the Nineveh Plain and forced thousands of Christians to leave Mosul and the towns in which they have been living since the first centuries of Christianity. Even though some towns are being liberated from ISIS after more than two years, the loss that persecution caused left Christians wounded and deeply affected. It is true that almost all of them survived ISIS, but crucial aspects of their faith or the way faith was expressed have changed or even been lost. That is not because the persecuted doubted their faith. Instead, there were factors caused by persecution that brought to an end some crucial characteristics of their faith. Leaving the land drained religious passions that were connected with the land. These are traditions that are meaningful and nourish faith only because they are practiced in the Christian towns in the Plain of Nineveh.

The Christian community in Iraq is considered one of the oldest Christian communities. The vast majority of members of this community speak the Aramaic language. The Plain of Nineveh in the north of Iraq is the Iraqi province that the majority of Christians inhabited. There were more than 125,000 of them living in the city of Mosul and in the towns and villages surrounding it. They belonged to different churches like the Ancient Church of the East, the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, and the Syriac Orthodox Church.

Since they left their towns, Christians realized that one of ISIS's main reasons to attack them and evacuate the Nineveh Plain was to wage a war against their cultural heritage, against their past and their future at the same time, and against the local traditions that shaped their Christian identity for centuries. And that goes far more harmful than killing individuals. There is an example I would like to present.

One of the important practices that the Christians of the Plain of Nineveh had in their towns was their respect for the shrines and tombs of martyrs. There are five remarkable shrines in Nineveh. Venerating saints and martyrs through walking in pilgrimage to these shrines marked the religious sense of Iraqi Christians. There were feasts and seasons when Christians visited these shrines to express crucial aspects of their identity. Through years and centuries these pilgrimages became traditions that were as old as Christianity in Iraq. During a pilgrimage, a community gathers to live a religious experience that immensely enriches them and strengthens their faith.

Firstly, being in relation with these shrines, they were connecting themselves with the past. These shrines were like wells of wisdom and moral virtue for those who attended the celebration. At the same time, these shrines were like oases for the community on pilgrimage where they can get the strength and comfort to continue on their way into the holy shrine in the heavenly temple. Secondly, the community gathered around the shrine where they declared that they do belong to that community of saints and martyrs. They desire to continue in the spiritual way their ancestor started. Thirdly, they teach their children how their future is likely to be. Attending those feasts created social, cultural, and spiritual harmony.

For centuries Christians in the Plain of Nineveh practiced and kept this tradition with such enthusiasm. That tradition gave them a solid sense of community. Every time the shrines were visited, the whole community would declare their will to continue with the faith of the apostles and saints. But ISIS swept that away, and for more than two years, the Christians of Nineveh have been exiled, far away from their homeland. This tradition that is connected with land and community would end as the people were forced into exile from the land. It was hard for the Christians to realize that by leaving their land they were losing what made them special, and they were slowly becoming assimilated to the world.

It was unexpected that ISIS would enter the area that Christians for ages believed was well protected by its churches, shrines, and saints. No one would believe that the town would be cleared of Christians in few days. Christians had to face a reality they never predicted. They are away from their land, and they are in the exile weeping the past and fearing the future.

The land was very important in the estimation of this people. There is religious passion connected with the land. Pilgrimage to holy places

as religious practice is an integral part of our culture, and it contributes to the forming the basis of Iraqi identity. The basis of our existence will become only stories from the past.

ISIS was not only after individuals or money. It was really after history. It was after what marked the Christianity in the Middle East with its special seal. Having left everything behind, people feel that they do not have much to offer the world: no identity, no traditions, no history. They have to start from zero, turning to the world to ask for their basic needs. That feeling of lost dignity makes many lose their confidence in the government and friends. They have to form a new community, a new way of living in peace. They need to trust in new norms that would not connect them with their past. They have to plant their seeds in a new land and move forward.

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Respond:

- Why not get together a group and talk through this issue of *Word & World* with our discussion questions?

About the author

Sister Nazek Matty OP (DPhil, Oxford) is a member of the Dominican Sisters of St Catherine of Siena. She is from Bashiqa, Iraq, one of the towns in the Plain of Nineveh that was captured by ISIS. She has been displaced in Kurdistan-Iraq since 2014, and she recounts her forced move [here](#). She teaches Bible in Erbil at Babel College, which belongs to the Chaldean Catholic Church. She is the author of *Sennacherib's Campaign against Judah and Jerusalem in 701 B.C: A Historical Reconstruction* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016).



A gospel worth dying for

Thoughts on persecution from Nigeria

Revd Dr Benjamin Kwashi

For the last thirty years or so, northern Nigeria has seen a series of riots, persecutions, and destruction. Sometimes whole families or communities were decimated; sometimes it was individuals who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and who refused to deny Christ, choosing rather to be killed. In the vast majority of instances, the names of these martyrs will be known and remembered only by their close relatives—and by the Lord. Some were those who were working for peace and reconciliation between Muslims and Christians; some were pastors; many were church members.

Those who carry the message of the gospel will not always be welcomed; there may be intimidation, persecution, humiliation, and

suffering. St Paul knew all of these, but he refused to give up. He searched out people of all faiths: Jews, worshipers of pagan idols, and those who served an “unknown god”. Always, under all circumstances, his concern, his aim, his reason for living was to “press on” with this gospel:

“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own” (Phil 3:12, ESV).

The gospel had so caught and transformed him, that he knew that no person, situation, or circumstance was beyond its power. It is the power of the gospel which has been given into our hands and into our hearts today. To bear witness to the love of Christ is not primarily a matter of academic debate, of round table discussion or even of media bombardment. It is simply living the gospel of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, day in and day out, in such a way that others see, are challenged, and are surprised.

To bear witness to the gospel in this way means dying to self and living for Christ. In his first epistle, Peter writes to encourage, to reassure, and to bring hope to the Christian churches in Asia Minor as they begin to face the storms of persecution. The letter instructs us and points us to the basis of our faith: Jesus Christ, our hope, now and forever. Peter points to the glory of God’s calling: Christians are God’s chosen people, heirs of God’s blessing—but Christians are also called to suffer, to endure unjust abuse and undeserved persecution. This is our calling because it was Christ’s calling, and we are called to follow his example (1 Pet 2:21). Christ suffered for our sake, and as we follow him, we suffer for his sake and for the sake of bringing others to know him.

Peter seeks to encourage believers not only to remain steadfast in the face of suffering, but also to examine the reasons why they must live in a troubled world and endure suffering and persecution, bearing in mind that Jesus suffered vicariously for the sins of the whole world and thereby achieved salvation for us. It is one thing to suffer due to ignorance, foolishness or deliberate personal sin and transgression. It is yet another thing to suffer innocently for righteousness’ sake. Each believer must examine carefully and truthfully the reasons for his or her suffering and see if it is worth it. Any suffering which does not lead people to Christ and bring blessing to people is not worth it.

Any suffering which is not for the sake of Jesus Christ and the gospel of salvation is not worth it. Any suffering that has no eternal value before God is utterly useless. Even if you are suffering through a sickness you did not inflict upon yourself, it will be important that you cast all your cares and burdens on Christ because he knows you, he knows your condition and he cares for you (1 Peter 5:7).

Otherwise you would have lost, fatally. This needs to be pointed out clearly to debunk the idea that passively accepting a state of suffering is a sign of being a believer. Some have even gone further to regard unnecessary, undue, and even senseless suffering as being a mark of a genuine faith. Nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus Christ did not come in order to make us suffer: he came to bring hope and a way through the troubles of this world. The world's troubles are real and not to be ignored. God has never promised his people that they would escape all trouble, but he has always promised to go through the troubles with us. Jesus said: "In the world you will face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world" (John 16:33, NRSV).

The suffering of Jesus Christ was because he confronted the powers of hell, of death, and of Satan himself. He suffered, but he had to do so in order to rescue a people from death to life, from darkness to light, from hell to heaven. He suffered to set on course an irreversible trend of transformation of history, people, lives, and communities. God loves the world and humanity so much that he could not leave us in sin for ever. The direct practical implication is that whoever is going to become involved in redeeming the world must face bitter confrontation and even death. Jesus literally went through all this so that today we are the direct beneficiaries of this huge price that God had to pay as his only Son suffered and died our death. The fact in all this is that Jesus rose from the dead triumphantly on the third day and ascended to heaven, to his throne as the saviour, redeemer, and judge.

And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:23–27, ESV).

The cross is the distinct identity of following Christ (Luke 9:23). There is no evasion of the cross if anyone is to be a disciple of Christ, neither is there discipleship without the cross. The cross is at the center of the gospel; it is at the heart of the good news, the message of salvation. The cross was to be the end of Jesus' ministry; it was meant to silence him by killing him to death. The conspiracy to kill him was completed. He did no wrong yet he was condemned by the forces of envy, hatred, jealousy, bitterness, slander, and betrayal. They ganged up and sentenced him to death on the cross. But on the third day, Jesus rose from the dead and is alive for evermore! That is the victory of the cross! "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18, ESV). This is the reason for the gospel missions and ministry until the return of our Lord.

Throughout the years, wherever there were Christians the mission has continued, no matter what the circumstances. Now it is our turn! We must make bold to stand up now when it matters most. We are to be builders, not destroyers. We must build all people and particularly young people and give them a hope for the future. Let us rise to resist destruction and all that destroys life, environment, and community. A gospel which has no effect in peoples' lives, which has no transforming power, is not the true or full gospel. Whatever the conditions around us, let us never forget: we have a gospel worth living for and a gospel worth dying for!

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Respond:

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About the author

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Suffering persecution for justice's sake

Reflecting on Gabon's contested election of 2016

Nesmy Bersot Mvé Nguéma

Translated from the French by Zina Ando Mvé Nguéma

Editor's note: Staff of the Groupes Bibliques du Gabon (GBG) were caught up in the violence following a disputed election in August 2016. Opposition leader Jean Ping lost to incumbent Ali Bongo by fewer than 6,000 votes, and Ping claimed he won and demanded a recount. The violence that ensued arose from what a major newspaper calls 'deep-seated popular anger' arising from Bongo's repressive methods and alleged corruption. Ping supporters burned the parliament buildings, and the military burned Ping's headquarters. Nesmy Bersot Mvé Nguéma, GBG National Secretary, first wrote from Gabon for the IFES blog [here](#). Soon after he wrote, the constitutional court completed a review of the election, announcing that Ali Bongo was the winner.

*Blessed are they that suffer persecution for justice's sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven
(Matthew 5:10).*

The Beatitudes are like the foreword of a country's constitution. Both contain declarations which convey values and principles on which the institution stands.

As a declaration carrying the weight of a 'fundamental value', the verse mentioned above establishes an inseparable link between happiness, justice, persecution, and suffering. But above all it raises two key issues about our martyrdom (witness): what type of persecution do we suffer from? How do we understand the notions of persecution and suffering for justice's sake?

What persecution do we suffer from?

We are blessed when we suffer for justice's sake. This is not the justice of men, which practices double standards, is applied rigorously to a neighbour but softens when it comes to one's own interests or the interests of loved ones, or plays it safe when it has to settle a dispute between the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor. Rather, this justice seeks truth and equity no matter the cost; it is not interested in its own fate when the well-being of a greater number of people is at stake. In a word, this justice obeys God.

I struggled with this notion of justice for two years. I knew what God's will was for me, but I was afraid of losing the comfortable social situation I had gained since I started working part-time in the ministry. I was afraid of lacking means and sufficient power to make things happen. I was also afraid of being guided by my own pride and ambitions. I needed God's guidance to put all the pieces together. And he answered in a powerful way during the July 2015 IFES World Assembly in Oaxtepec, Mexico, as well as during my stay in Atlanta, Georgia. The Bible expositions, particularly those by Munther Isaac on Daniel 3, and my pilgrimage in the footsteps of Martin Luther King Jr. opened my eyes to the blessed value of useful suffering and the pressing need to align my life with my faith. My credo is,

"If I must die, it must be for a just cause. And the only one is the Gospel." I reclaimed that credo by integrating the social impact of Christ's Gospel

(See the Lausanne Covenant, the Cape Town Commitment). I therefore returned home and got involved in civil society.

How do we understand suffering and persecution as Christians?

The major difficulty for us Christians is to move from great declarations to their practical and full implementation. The awareness that the implementation of the resolutions that we formulate when in contact with the truth will not be without some type of suffering brings about strong apprehensions. It is true that one advantage of fear is that it pushes individuals with a sanguine temperament like me to sit and evaluate the cost of the tower that I wish to build. Unfortunately, it has the disadvantage of paralyzing bold actions.

Below are a few ways of grasping persecution and suffering:

The heroism of fools: This approach consists in underestimating the threat linked to our commitment for justice. Churches are full of these nonsensical heroes. I myself was once a member of this club of so-called extraordinary gentlemen. The lesson I have learned is that I have to suffer in my body and in my soul because of my faith. If my life becomes too peaceful, I better do a quick check-up to ensure that I have not compromised with the enemy unintentionally or that I have not created a comfort zone.^[1] However, I should not seek suffering for the sheer sake of it. My suffering must come from a just persecution, not from religious masochism. I have often wondered why Jesus fled the stoning in Nazareth when he had become man in order to die in shame. Surely it was because this was not the time or the place to die.

The spiritualizing of the cowards: This is the behaviour of those who chose not to obey out of fear of suffering. Instead of taking responsibility, they blame those who dare to obey by interpreting the Scriptures in their interest. I have mostly suffered from this type of people though I expected encouragement and intercessory prayer from them. Among them were those who placed worldly interests before Christ, those who condemned us, those who resigned themselves to inaction, and the theorizers. The group that placed worldly interests first is made of people like the pastor of one of our students who was arrested and tortured by the regime's militia. After some time, this pastor, who comes from the same province as Gabon's head of state, took a disciplinary measure against the student. Another pastor taught his members that all authority comes from God, no matter how it had been obtained. Consequently, any uprising

is an act of disobedience to God. In fact, this has close ties to the regime and does not hide it.

The group that condemned us include Christians who blamed me and another brother. They consider the mission of the Church as being limited to the salvation of souls and prayer. They clearly accused us of being apostates and heretics and of twisting the meaning of Scriptures to serve our own ends. The group that resigned themselves to inaction urged us to accept God's decision: "We prayed and God has answered by keeping him in power," they said, adding that "anyway, the Bible says that the wicked will rule until the rapture." As for the theorizers, I was surprised to hear some companions encourage me to shut myself at home, although all the teachings received at Oaxtepec still resonated in our heads. I was struck to hear them say that the risk was too high. I asked one of them: "Whom are our teachings meant for?" What I heard, I also conveyed to my students. And when the opportunity presented itself, I could not be a mere theorizer of justice and equity.

The denial of the unbelievers: This category of Christians thinks that they can eliminate everything through mantras. When we raised current moral and social issues, they simply chanted "null and void," "that will never happen, in-the-name-of Jesus!", "I declare!", "I refuse!", and so on. Before the crisis, they held multiple all-night prayer vigils and made Panglossian prophecies which did not spare us from chaos. Denying suffering on the way of the cross does not make it disappear. On the contrary, it leads us astray. In order to travel from Egypt to Canaan, we must take the desert road. No matter how much we wish that God would create an aerial bridge in antiquity, his ways do not comply with technical and technological progress in the field of transport.

The foolishness of believers: In today's world, it is a folly to obey God. In the best-case scenario, we may be considered as retrogrades or be stigmatized; and in the worst case, we will be slain in a matter of hours. But we should not fear those who can kill but the body. The one we should fear is he who has power over body and soul, for he alone also has the power to grant eternal life. Furthermore, why should we fear losing this corruptible body since there is no doubt that we shall be raised again with incorruptible bodies? We believe in divine deliverance in the present life, without making it a condition for our obedience.

For, even if our God does not deliver us, we by far prefer to die out of obedience than live through betrayal.

It sounds foolish, but that is the price we have to pay for our lives to find their meaning. The apostles, Stephen, Martin Luther King Jr, and the Garissa students had most certainly heard similar words. I read these words through the tears of my wife one evening while the city was under siege. I had gone out with some friends to buy basic necessities for ourselves and the people who had been arrested and whom we wished to assist. It was a very risky endeavor because the militia shot without warning. When I got back to our room, she told me: “I feel useless. I wish I were more involved, because I know it is what God would want me to do.” It is this type of words that sustained me from Oaxtepec until the Gabonese constitutional court confirmed Ali Bongo’s victory in the August 2016 presidential elections. Since then, these words are drifting away, washed down by fear which paralyses me more and more each day, as well as by discouragement.

Thankfully, “Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them” (Psalm 126:6, NIV). Thankfully, “I trusted in the Lord when I said: ‘I am greatly afflicted’” (Ps 116:10, NIV). So, I strive to tell my soul over and over: “Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God” (Ps 43:5, NIV). Today, I do not rely on what I hear or see. I am sure that there is a greater army on the hills. I am sure that even though it may take a while, a miracle will happen. And even though God does not deem me worthy to see the fulfillment of this miracle, the honor of dying for the cause of justice, if necessary, is a much greater privilege than witnessing the fruit of my commitment.

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Respond:

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About the author

Nesmy Bersot Mvé Nguéma surrendered his life to the Lord in 1999. He has been on staff with Groupes Bibliques du Gabon (GBB) since 2005, first as a full-time volunteer, then as a full-time National Secretary and now as a part-time National Secretary. He also works as a legal advisor. He is married with three sons.



The hidden glory of martyrdom

When God seems silent in the midst of suffering

Michael P Jensen

This year saw the release of Martin Scorsese's long-awaited film of Japanese novelist Shūsaku Endō's book *Silence*. The novel tells the story of two seventeenth century Jesuit priests who travel from Portugal to Japan to locate their missing mentor, Father Ferreira. Rodrigues travels to Japan knowing that a great persecution has virtually eradicated the Christianity that had been planted in the 16th century. He is keen to make contact with whatever Christians remain, and to discover what happened to Father Ferreira, a missionary who is said to have apostatized.

Rodrigues witnesses the martyrdom of two local Christians, Okichi and Ichizo. They are tied to stakes in the surging tide, and left to die of exhaustion. Rodrigues writes:

They were martyred. But what a martyrdom! I had long read about martyrdom in the lives of the saints—how the souls of the martyrs had gone home to Heaven, how they had been filled with glory in Paradise, how the angels had blown trumpets. This was the splendid martyrdom I had often seen in my dreams. But the martyrdom of the Japanese Christians I now describe to you was no such glorious thing. What a miserable and painful business it was! The rain falls unceasingly on the sea. And the sea which killed them surges on uncannily—in silence. (pp. 103–4)

Rodrigues had long experienced the veneration of Christian martyrs, and expected to see ‘splendid martyrdom’. Instead, it was a ‘miserable and painful business’. In reality, the torture and suffering of Christians was grotesque and dehumanizing. It was, instead of a foretaste of heaven, an experience of hell.

Rodrigues senses not the presence of God in these events, but his absence—his silence.

Why has the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ forsaken those who are willing to die for him? Why does he not rescue the Christians who were executed by beheading on the Libyan coast, or the Syrian Christian women who are fleeing for their lives, or the Nigerian Christians who are bombed as they gather to worship on a Sunday, or the North Korean Christians languishing in labour camps? What Endo helps us to see is that there is no romantic gloss to their suffering.

Dying for Christ does not make physical degradation any less than what it is. Pain is still pain. The fear of death and dying is still real. There is no beauty in agony.

We need to see this again, because, like Rodrigues, Christians have a tendency to depict martyrdom as a kind of holy suffering, fairly glowing with the radiance of heaven. We have long celebrated and honoured the martyrs because they have been God’s present to his people. They’ve demonstrated in their suffering for the name of Christ what every Christian’s life is like: a dying to self and rising to new life. But the glory of martyrdom isn’t on the surface and obvious to all. It is hidden from view, and only visible to the eyes of faith. We see this in the book of Revelation, which takes us behind the scenes of history itself to the deeper reality of the events. John sees Rome as a beast

not because it looks like a beast as a matter of fact. Indeed, it doesn't! If you were to read everything from its surface appearance, you would think that the church is a doomed project. You would see Rome succeeding in stamping out Christianity. You would see the blood of the martyrs as just blood, congealing in pools on the floor of the arena. And you would hear the deafening silence of God. Surely this is a God-forsaken people, pitiable beyond others? Surely, we could taunt them as Elijah taunted the prophets of Baal—is your God too busy, or asleep? Has he got a poor memory? Out to lunch maybe?

We should at least, as Endo does, pause here and feel the sharpness of the question.

Especially we who do not live under the threat of persecution should try for a moment to imagine what it is like to pray for release from a terrible fate but have no response.

But it is the cross of Christ which is the pattern for all Christian suffering and also its hope. The glory of Christian martyrdom is revealed to us because it points to the glory of God revealed in the face of the suffering Christ.

That too was a hidden glory. It was glorious not because of Christ's courage, or his nobility, or his endurance. Jesus's suffering was at the hands of petty, ruthless, and cruel individuals. What people saw when they witnessed his death was that it was either ridiculous or pathetic. They scoffed and mocked, because it seemed so futile. Even as he died, Jesus cried out to the sky, *Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani?*, which translates as 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

The death of Jesus of Nazareth was glorious because God declared it to be. The resurrection of the Son of God from the dead overturned the persecution of Jesus's persecutors. Their verdict against him did not stand. It was not that Jesus's principles lived on, or his memory, or that his death inspired a movement. It was that Jesus *himself* now lives, in the glorious body given to him in the resurrection. God is not in fact silent. He has spoken over Jesus Christ, and declared him innocent.

Christian martyrdom does not come with an anaesthetic. It is not spared grief, pain, despair, or doubt. It is ugly. It journeys through hell itself. But it is empowered by the resurrection of Jesus Christ

from the dead. If the rejection of Jesus by the world was itself rejected by God, then those who suffer and die for his name likewise know that they are encompassed by the saving mercy of God. In the book of Revelation, the martyrs are robed in white, the colour of victory (chs 6 and 7), because they have washed them in the blood of the Lamb.

The testimony of the martyrs is not just for those living under the threat of violent persecution. It is for those Christians who get to live in comfortable homes and work in air-conditioned offices just as much. The Christian life is cross-shaped. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said:

“The cross is laid on every Christian”

— and that includes the ones who do not face being killed for their faith. Christian martyrdom shows us the Christian life is always and everywhere a dying to self—and that the glory of this dying to self is very much hidden. Our small, everyday moments of saying ‘no’ to the world or of carrying the burdens of others or of pouring ourselves out in service are not often applauded. The cost of them to us, if not as great as dying itself, is tangible. The Christian life hurts.

And yet this everyday dying to self is met on the other side by a rising to new life. In Christ, by faith, we are not condemned. Rather, we are called forth into the freedom of a new hope and purpose, to do his works in the world, to the glory of his name.

. . .

Respond:

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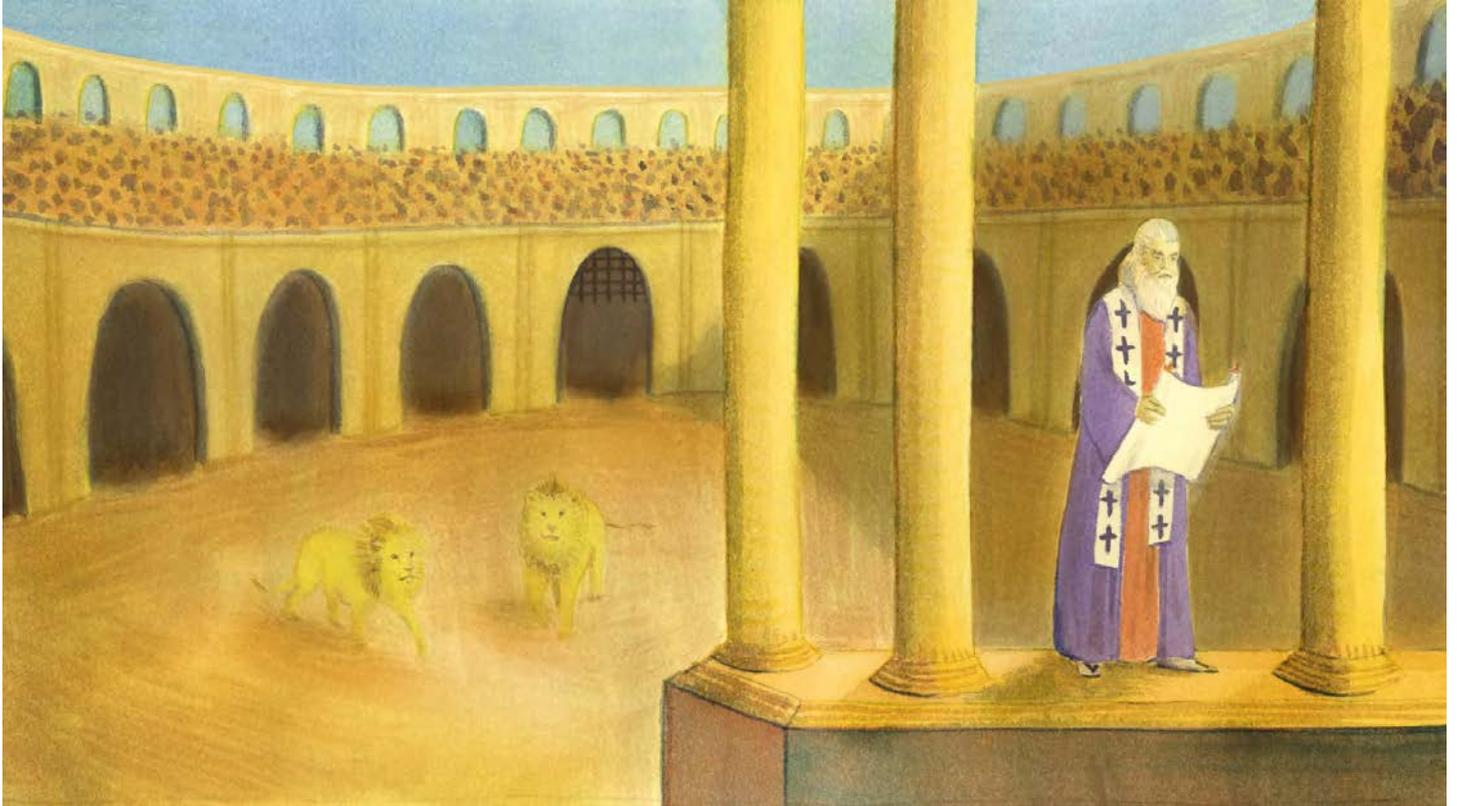
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About the author

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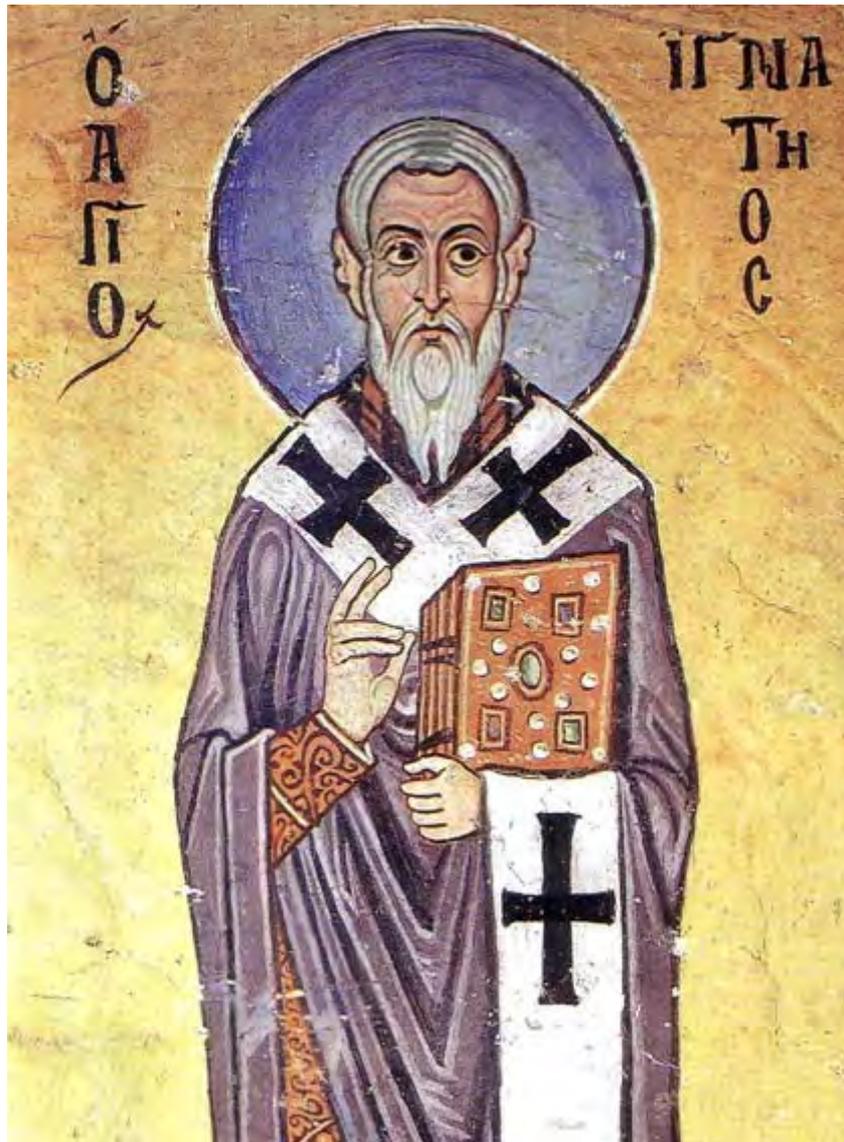


Suffering and persecution in early Christianity

Exploring the writings of Ignatius and Justin Martyr

Matthew J Thomas

Among the many characteristics of early Christians that astonished their pagan neighbors, one of the most prominent was their willingness to suffer persecution, and even death, for their faith. The writings of three second-century figures—St. Ignatius of Antioch, the unknown author of the Epistle to Diognetus, and St. Justin Martyr—bear witness to this remarkable quality of early Christians, and they demonstrate how early Christians can inspire those of us who are heirs to their faith today.



In the early second century, Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, wrote letters to a number of churches on the way to his execution in Rome. In these letters, Ignatius begs the churches to pray for him, but not to interfere with his impending martyrdom, which will allow him to be not simply “a mere voice,” but indeed “a word of God” (*Rom.* 2.1). In this, Ignatius draws upon the example of “our God Jesus Christ,” who “is more visible now that he is in the Father” than he was in his own earthly life (*Rom.* 3.3). Chained and escorted by a company of soldiers, Ignatius writes that though his guards only abuse him more when they are treated kindly, “[y]et because of their mistreatment I am becoming more of a disciple” (*Rom.* 5.1). Ignatius indeed rejoices in the closeness that his suffering brings him to God:

“The one near to the sword is near to God, and he who is in the midst of beasts is in the midst of God: only let

it be in the name of Jesus Christ, so as to suffer together with him. I endure all things because he, the perfect man, empowers me” (Smyr. 5.1).

For those who face similar antagonism from Christianity’s opponents, Ignatius counsels to “allow them to be instructed by you, at least by your deeds. In response to their anger, be gentle; in response to their boasts, be humble; in response to their slander, offer prayers; in response to their errors, be steadfast in the faith; in response to their cruelty, be civilized; do not be eager to imitate them” (*Eph.* 10.1–2). It is by following Christ’s example, especially in face of persecution, that the truth is made known: as Ignatius writes, “[t]he work is not a matter of persuasive rhetoric; rather, Christianity is greatest when it is hated by the world” (*Rom.* 3.3).

The willingness to suffer seen in Ignatius is similarly attested in the *Epistle to Diognetus*, an anonymous second-century apology for the faith. In introducing Christianity to Diognetus (evidently a pagan of some standing), the author describes the paradoxical encounter of pagan hostility and Christian beneficence:

[Christians] obey the established laws; indeed in their private lives they transcend the laws. They love everyone, and by everyone they are persecuted. They are unknown, yet they are condemned; they are put to death, yet they are brought to life. They are poor, yet they make many rich; they are in need of everything, yet they abound in everything. They are dishonored, yet they are glorified in their dishonor; they are slandered, yet they are vindicated. They are cursed, yet they bless; they are insulted, yet they offer respect. When they do good, they are punished as evildoers; when they are punished, they rejoice as though brought to life. By the Jews they are assaulted as foreigners, and by the Greeks they are persecuted, yet those who hate them are unable to give a reason for their hostility. (Diog. 5.10–17)

The apologist illustrates this relationship between well-meaning Christians and the hostile world with an analogy, that of the soul and the body:

In a word, what the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians throughout the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, but is not of the body; likewise Christians dwell in the world, but are not of the world. The soul, which is invisible, is confined in the body, which is visible; in the same way, Christians are recognized as being in the world,

and yet their religion remains invisible. The flesh hates the soul and wages war against it, even though it has suffered no wrong, because it is hindered from indulging in its pleasures; so also the world hates the Christians, even though it has suffered no wrong, because they set themselves against its pleasures. The soul loves the flesh that hates it, and its members, and Christians love those who hate them. The soul is locked up in the body, but it holds the body together; and though Christians are detained in the world as if in a prison, they in fact hold the world together. The soul, which is immortal, lives in a mortal dwelling; similarly Christians live as strangers amid perishable things, while waiting for the imperishable in heaven. The soul, when poorly treated with respect to food and drink, becomes all the better; and so Christians when punished daily increase more and more. Such is the important position to which God has appointed them, and it is not right for them to decline it. (Diog. 6.1–10)

For the author of *Diognetus*, the way in which Christians take up their God-appointed position in the face of persecution serves as evidence that theirs is no mere human doctrine:

[Do you not see] how they are thrown to wild beasts to make them deny the Lord, and yet they are not conquered? Do you not see that as more of them are punished, the more others increase? These things do not look like human works; they are the power of God, they are proofs of his presence. (Diog. 7.7–9)



Such things served as proof for Justin Martyr, a philosopher who converted to Christianity and wrote defenses of the faith to the Emperor and Senate around 150 A.D. Previously a Platonist and admirer of Socrates, Justin became a Christian in part from seeing how Christians were fearless of death (*2 Apol.* 12). Interestingly, Justin maintains a high view of Socrates, holding that Christ as the *logos* was known to him in part, and that evil demons conspired against Socrates for teaching what was righteous and true, much as they do to Christians. Nevertheless, Justin recognizes that no one trusted in Socrates so as to die for his teaching, while in Christ, “not only philosophers and scholars believed, but also artisans and people entirely uneducated, despising both glory, and fear, and death” (*2 Apol.* 10).

As a Christian philosopher, Justin makes clear to the Roman authorities that Christians do not seek persecution as a form of quasi-suicide, and indeed writes his apologies so that the Romans should bring their maltreatment of Christians to an end (which would go

unheeded, as Justin himself is martyred around 165 A.D.). However, Justin also makes clear that he writes out of love for the persecutors themselves, so that they might escape the just judgment of God and be brought to life. For if the persecutors do not listen, Christians “reckon that no evil can be done to us, unless we be convicted as evil-doers or be proved to be wicked men; and you, you can kill, but not hurt us” (*1 Apol.* 2).

These witnesses from the second century serve as an encouragement and inspiration for Christians who live with the reality of persecution, as well as those who practice their faith in safety today. For those who know persecution first-hand, these figures encourage us to recognize that the way of suffering has been well-worn from the beginning by Christian saints—indeed, the greatness of the faith was seen most clearly when faced by the world’s hatred, and their suffering was the very means by which God awakened and transformed the hearts of their pagan opponents. Among those who live in safety, these early witnesses inspire us to examine how we can accept with joy those opportunities, however small, that we are granted to suffer with Christ in our own lives each day. For it is in suffering that Christ’s glory is revealed (John 12:23–28), and if we suffer together with Him, we shall be glorified together with Him as well (Romans 8:17).

. . .

Respond:

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About the author

Matthew J Thomas studied at Pepperdine University in California and worked in ministry with youth at an after-school program in Oakland, California, before doing masters work at Regent College in Vancouver. He has recently completed a D.Phil. in Theology (New Testament and Patristics) at the University of Oxford, which focuses on the understanding of Pauline “works of the law” within the early centuries of the church, and the relation of early patristic sources to contemporary perspectives on Paul. He currently serves as Adjunct Instructor in Sacred Scripture at St. Patrick’s Seminary and University in Menlo Park, California, and Distance Education Instructor in Theology at Regent College, Vancouver. Matthew and his wife LeeAnne have one daughter, Camille, who is also an aspiring theologian.



‘Martyrdom we can accept, but not genocide!’

Is faithful endurance the only paradigm for Christians under persecution?

Hwa Yung

BBC Magazine last year reported on a Christian militia specifically formed to protect Christian villages near Mosul, called the Babylon Brigade.* It was funded by the Iraqi government and fighting alongside other Muslim militias. The leader of this group was quoted as saying that they were left with no choice because ISIS specifically targeted Christians. The journalist went on to pose the question, “What about the commandment: Thou shalt not kill?” To this, the militia commander responded, “We have to fight. We have to defend ourselves.” Regretfully, the tone of the article was somewhat patronizing, as if it was wrong to fight—because the writer could not remember from his schooldays Bible studies when Jesus ever told his

followers to arm themselves! Would the journalist have asked the same question on the sixth commandment of soldiers fighting at Dunkirk and Normandy or members of the French Resistance during the Second World War? Is it right to defend nations against ruthless dictators like Hitler but wrong to protect innocent lives and communities against violent persecutions that verge on religious cleansing? The above sums up a major challenge confronting Christian communities under persecution.

Studies have shown that persecutions against peoples of all faiths have been on the rise and are widespread globally today, with Christians most targeted.* Paul Marshall, Lela Gilbert, and Nina Shea assert:

“Christians are the single most widely persecuted religious group in the world today. This is confirmed in studies by sources as diverse as the Vatican, Open Doors, the Pew Research Center, Commentary, Newsweek, and The Economist. According to one estimate, by the Catholic Bishops’ Conferences of the European Community, seventy-five percent of acts of religious intolerance are directed against Christians.”

Similarly, Pope Francis has repeatedly spoken out against widespread persecutions, especially in the Middle East where the continuing existence of historic Christians communities is being threatened among Armenians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Maronites, Melkites, and Syriac Catholics. “Where is the conscience of the world?” he asks. Regretfully, for reasons too complex to discuss here, various observers have noted that Western political leaders often have been reluctant to act or failed to act.*

Estimates of the number of Christians killed vary. Todd M. Johnson from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, using a broad definition of martyrdom, suggests that some one hundred thousand Christians are killed annually from 2000 to 2010.* But others more conservatively speak of between seven and eight thousand.* Nevertheless, these figures do not tell us the gravity of the problem, especially in relation to the massive displacement of whole communities and exile from ancestral lands, wherein they have lived for centuries, if not millenia. For example, of some one and a half million Christians living in Iraq before the 2003 war, less than half a million are left today. Another example from a very different context is the displacement of minority Christian tribal groups by the government in Burma.

Historically the manner by which Christians have responded to persecution has been largely defined by some key texts in the New Testament. These include “Do not resist the one who is evil” (Matt. 5:39) and “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next” (Matt. 10:23).^{*} So when the Jewish authorities began the first major persecution in Jerusalem, Christians “were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8:1). And in the book of Revelation, when the slain martyrs cried out for justice and vengeance, “They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete” (Rev. 6:11). In general these passages have been interpreted to counsel acceptance of persecution and martyrdom, escape if possible, and leaving the issues of justice and vengeance against evil to God who is sovereign. We can sum up this approach as “faithful endurance.”^{*}

There can be no doubt that the New Testament call to faithful endurance remains the fundamental paradigm for the Christian church in every age in its response to persecution. It is too deeply rooted in both the mystery and the power of the cross for it to be set aside for something else. Nevertheless, are there good reasons why it should be questioned whether this approach says all that needs to be said about the Christian response to persecution? I would like to suggest that there are.

We begin first with the persecutions in the early church under the Roman Empire. Actually, these never involved the huge numbers of popular imagination. Based partly on the work of early church historian W. H. C. Frend, Rodney Stark has argued that the number of martyrs is only hundreds and not thousands.^{*} The sporadic waves of persecution that occurred usually targeted bishops and leaders only. What make them memorable is not the numbers but the horrific sufferings the persecuted went through and the quiet radiance with which many faced death! In contrast, what is happening today in various places around the world is of a totally different order. The numbers are much higher and the persecutions much more persistent, intense and violent. This has led to some Syrian bishops saying in the context of the present crisis, “Martyrdom we can accept, but not genocide!”

Secondly, whether they be mob violence or state-directed persecutions during and after the apostolic period, all these took place in the context of an empire with a relative high degree of law and order. The Acts account (16:35–40; 19:35–40; 22:25) clearly shows Christians

receiving or claiming protection under the law from local officials. But persecutions today often occur in contexts where law and order have broken down, or where government authorities are either negligent or even directly behind the attacks. Many of these have resulted in violence on a colossal scale along with sexual slavery, murders, genocide, and the dislocation of communities.

Thirdly, within the Western tradition itself, the Christian response to persecution has not always been restricted to the faithful endurance paradigm. Take for example the Reformation of the sixteenth century. Would Luther have survived and succeeded if it was not commonly known that Frederick the Wise, as well as other German princes, was standing by him, with arms if necessary? Or what would have happened to the Scottish Reformation under John Knox had English forces not intervened?

Fast forward four centuries to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's painful decision to join the plot to eliminate Hitler, in the context of an immoral war and genocides of unprecedented proportions. Just before returning to Germany from the U.S. in 1939, he wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr the following: "Such a decision each man must make for himself. Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose, but I cannot make that choice in security." * He could not have written this if faithful endurance is the only paradigm for Christians under persecution or for Christian civilizations threatened with annihilation!

This then brings us to the question of whether it is ever right for Christians to resort to the use of arms in defending their loved ones, communities and civilization. In a discussion with some Nigerian Christians who were facing premeditated church burnings and large scale killings, a friend of mine suggested that they may need to consider applying the just war tradition for the purpose of self-defense in such situations. Surprisingly he was told that they had never heard of it! The just war tradition is generally accepted by a majority of Catholics and Protestants, particularly against immoral aggression and in defense of the innocent. As summarized by John Stott in *Issues Facing Christians Today*, seven conditions have to be met if a war is to be just: "formal declaration, last resort, just cause, right intention, proportionate means, non-combatant immunity, and reasonable expectation." *

However, there are serious Christian thinkers who have challenged the just war tradition in favor of a strict pacifism. In recent years, Richard B. Hays has probably made the most sustained critique of this from a biblical perspective. *His position can be summed up as this: “From Matthew to Revelation we find a consistent witness against violence and a calling to the community to follow the example of Jesus in *accepting* suffering rather than *inflicting* it.... The New Testament offers no basis for ever declaring Christian participation in war ‘just.’” *

But is Hays right? I will simply offer two comments. First, what does he make of Romans 13:4 which speaks of the ruler who bears the sword as God’s servant? He writes, “Though the governing authority bears the sword to execute God’s wrath ... that is not the role of the believer.” * But what happens when the ruler is a believer? Hays does not say. Furthermore, if it is the government’s responsibility to rule and to maintain law and order, what happens when the government fails, and law and order have broken down? Is the Christian simply to accept the chaos and suffer whatever consequences thereof? It appears that Hays has oversimplified the problem.

This leads to the second comment. Hays notes that someone may well ask him what would happen if Christians had refused to fight against Hitler in the Second World War? His response is a counter-question: “What if Christians in Germany had emphatically refused to fight *for* Hitler, refused to carry out the murders in concentration camps?” * Hays may well have a point with respect to Germany, but he misses it completely on the other side of the globe—only a tiny handful of the Japanese armed forces were Christian! And if Hays is wrong about the Japanese aggressors during the Second World War, he is even more so in the battle against ISIS today.

To sum up, it has been noted that we are facing religious persecution directed against all faiths on an unprecedented scale today and especially at Christians. In many places, these persecutions have escalated to genocidal proportions. Yet, the dominant narrative that the global church uses in response to persecution remains that of faithful endurance. Despite the important role of the just war tradition in Christian history, little work has been done to apply the same principles to genocide in persecution. This brief paper does not pretend to make a comprehensive case for it. Rather it seeks to challenge the Christian church to see that there exist a lacuna in our thinking about persecution today, and that this warrants a major

effort to develop a more adequate moral theological response to it—a theology of just defense, if you like.

To do this effectively, some thorny issues must be addressed. First, are there sound biblical and theological grounds for the principles of just defense to be applied to persecuted communities? Second, there is clearly a continuum between individual martyrdoms and genocide of whole communities. Under what conditions would it be appropriate for Christians to move from faithful endurance to just defense for the protection of family, community and civilization? This is an issue not just on a regional or national level, but also at the local level. For example, anecdotal evidences from various places suggest that churches were less likely to be burnt and communities attacked if these were protected by Christian vigilante groups. But the ever present danger here is to slip from the just defense and protection of vulnerable religious communities into revenge and uncontrolled aggression on the persecutors.

Thus, thirdly, codes of conduct governing just defense must be carefully defined so that Christian actions for good will not end up paving the way for greater violence or, even worse, a religious war! Finally, given that persecutions of Christians occur in a whole variety of contexts globally, we need to work out guidelines to help churches to think through when just defense is appropriate and needs acting upon, and when it is foolhardy and would lead to even greater disaster for the church and gospel. An example of the latter is the situation of churches under certain Marxist regimes today. In any case, the problem is urgent and the challenge unavoidable.

Respond:

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About the author

Hwa Yung was the bishop of the Methodist Church in Malaysia from 2004–2012. Prior to that he served as the Principal of Malaysian Theological Seminary, and later as the Director for the Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia at Trinity Theological College, Singapore. He has played active roles in international ministries such as the Lausanne Movement and the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies. Presently he is the Honorary President of IFES. He is the author of *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014).



A theology of tears: cry with us

Lamentation and hope in the Middle East

Yohanna Katanacho

This essay seeks to present a theology of hope in the midst of tears. I will focus on the Book of Lamentations, highlighting different human responses to the theopolitical catastrophe in 587 B.C., the fall of Jerusalem. My points are simply: there was no comforter, no prophet, and no hope. I will simultaneously point out significant correspondences with Palestinian and Middle Eastern catastrophic realities. Last, I will present important lessons that Christians need to consider in their prophetic imagination.

During the last few years and in light of the realities in the Middle East, I have been studying the Book of Lamentations. The similarities of pain shocked me and I was moved to write the following poem:

. . . .

Cry with Us

*This is a season of weeping and mourning, but it is not void of hope.
Our tears are the bridge between brutality and humanity.
Our tears are the salty gates for seeing a different reality.
Our tears are facing soulless nations and a parched mentality.
Our tears are the dam preventing rivers of animosity.
For the sake of the mourning men, cry with us to reflect your amity.
For the sake of the poor children, cry with us demanding sanity.
For the sake of lamenting mothers, refuse violence and stupidity.
Love your enemies and cry with them is the advice of divinity.
Blessing those who curse is the path to genuine spirituality.
Pouring tears of mercy and compassion is true piety.
Pray with tears, for the sake of spreading equity.
Followers of Jesus: crying is now our responsibility.
But don't cry for your friends only; but also for your Enemy.*

. . .

I had many existential questions. What do we say or do when our cities collapse and hunger invades our streets? How do we respond when homes are destroyed and young children are brutally killed? What do we do when the teeth of evil are like nails from hell penetrating our souls? Why is God absent when the civic and moral infrastructures of our society collapse? Why does God forsake us when our holy places are defiled and our religious symbols are despised? The Book of Lamentations hosted my feelings and helped me to express my frustrations.* It says: “Streams of tears flow from my eyes because my people are destroyed. My eyes will flow unceasingly, without relief, until the Lord looks down from heaven and sees. What I see brings grief to my soul because of all the women of my city” (Lam. 3:48–51, NIV).

There is no doubt that the Book of Lamentations is a place full of sorrow, sadness, and salty tears. This book is very relevant to our Middle Eastern situation. It can be a founding stone for our theology. My assumption is that the destruction of Jerusalem during the times of Jeremiah is similar to the Al Nakbah war in 1948 and to the series of catastrophes that some Middle Easterners experience today.* Based on the Book of Lamentations, I will highlight three areas: there is no comforter, there is no prophet, and there is no hope.

First, there is no comforter.

The Book of Lamentations points out the destruction of the socio-religious infrastructure of ancient Israel.* The text describes the besieging of Jerusalem, its famine, its invasion by a powerful army, the execution of its leaders, the exile of its people, the looting of its religious places, and the collapse of any hope. It simply states that there is no comforter. The Book of Lamentations keeps repeating this statement: there is no comforter (Lam. 1: 2, 9, 16, 17, and 21). It states that no one can help the people to deal with their pain and pitiful realities. No one is showing them mercy or compassion or offering them encouragement and hope in the midst of their trouble. There is no comforter for Palestinians or Syrians or Iraqis or other nations in similar situations. Israelis are not going to resolve their problems. Neither the Arab world, nor the European world, nor the Islamic world, nor the United Nations are going to help them. The world has abandoned them. There is no comforter. We therefore lament.

Second, there is no prophet.

The text says that “the law is no more, and her prophets no longer find visions from the Lord” (Lam. 2:9, NIV). God is silent and people are suffering. This has led to many reactions. Some rightly ask: where is God? No doubt that many people in the Middle East rejected God because he did not protect them. As a Christian I prefer to accuse God instead of boycotting him, or eliminating his existence. Some believed that God had rejected them. The Book of Lamentations starts with a question about the suffering of the city, but ends with a question about the endurance of the rejection of God. Some preferred the path of self-pity, adopting a victim mentality that wants all people to see their pain (Lam. 1:12). Some preferred the path of revenge (Lam. 1:22; 3:64). They dehumanized their enemies in order to facilitate destroying them.

However, we as Christians cannot abandon the logic of love that prompts us to seek justice without abandoning the human dignity of all the inhabitants. Revenge is not our path.

Third, the Book of Lamentations depicts a reality in which there is no hope.

It reminds us of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in which he wrote about the sign on the gates of hell. It says: “Through me you pass into the city of woe... All hope abandon ye who enter here.” * In Palestine, Israel, Syria, and many other countries in the Middle East, we have an impossible task as we seek to find a political hope.

However, the Book of Lamentations points out that hope does not depend on the circumstances but on seeing the divine perspective.

The existence of a prophetic vision is indispensable for the existence of hope. Gladly, the Palestinian Kairos Document has a prophetic voice following in the footsteps of those who affirm faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:13).^{*} In First Corinthians, the literary unit of these three virtues is chapters 12–15. It concludes with a strong message of hope rooted in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, we follow in the footsteps of Saint Augustine. In his *Enchiridion*, or *Handbook*, he points out that hope is born out of faith.^{*} Hope cannot exist without faith. He adds that “he who does not love believes in vain, even if what he believes is true; he hopes in vain . . . unless he believes and hopes for this: that he may through prayer obtain the gift of love.”^{*} Love unites us to God.^{*} Love does not mean abandoning justice but it does mean pursuing justice with the logic of love, not with revenge. Good hope cannot exist without faith and love. In the Book of Lamentations, the text says:

Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, “The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.” The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord (Lam. 3:21–26, NIV).

This hope is confirmed and embodied in the Book of Acts. God inflicted pain on Jerusalem in the Book of Lamentations, and first century Jerusalem revenged by killing the Messiah of Israel. However, the triune God ended this cycle of violence through faith, love, and hope. The Father loved us and offered his only begotten Son on the cross. The Son wept over Jerusalem and suffered at its hands but he forgave and embodied the path of love. Then the Holy Spirit came to Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit is the Comforter that will end our exile from God and will grant us a prophetic vision not rooted in an ethnocentric reality and neither limited to one group, whether Greeks or Hebrews. Instead, we are witnesses and prophets to the whole world (Acts 1:7–8). Middle Eastern Christians are walking in the footsteps of the early church advocating faith, love, and hope. Hope is accessible to all those who call upon the name of the Lord (Acts 2:21).

Our witness is indispensable if the church is going to continue to embody the power of biblical faith, love, and hope to Muslims, Jews, and other faith communities. The multi ethnic church continues to be God's hand to help the poor, challenge oppressive powers, fight discrimination, and spread the comfort of God to the ends of the earth. We are a sign of hope.

Some important lessons for Christians

1. We can cry in the midst of catastrophes.

Lamenting is not hopelessness, but it is human, and it helps us to maintain our humanity as we mourn with those who are mourning. But let us cry together and let us cry as an expression of commitment to pursue justice and human dignity with the logic of love.

2. We will not abandon good hope.

Those who abandon hope will also abandon the pursuit of justice. A bad hope will lead to a suicidal revenge, but a good hope will remind us of God's mercy and remind us that we are covenant creatures and his people. Christians are a covenant people who can expect the blessings of God despite the forces of death. The structures of injustices shall eventually collapse because Babel shall fall down and heavenly Jerusalem shall come down.

3. We will commit ourselves to faith, hope, and love.

Our hope is not wishful thinking, or optimism, and is not founded on the typhonic political atmosphere. It is founded on the nature of our God who conquered death, established the church of the martyrs, and promised to be with us. Hope is the bridge that will help us to move from the current reality to the hoped for reality. It is a force of change that re humanizes people who have been slaves to the forces of dehumanization. It can only be good change when it is accompanied by faith and love and submission to the Holy Spirit. It is not a surprise that our Middle Eastern prophetic voices insist on human dignity from the perspective of faith, asserting that all human beings are created in the image of God, affirming the logic of love, and choosing good hope.

Respond:

- Why not get together a group and talk through this issue of *Word & World* with our discussion questions?



About the author

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Discussion questions

Start a conversation on Christian persecution and suffering

Word & World is meant to go beyond just reading. For each issue we put together a set of questions that delve into the articles, designed for you to use in a group. Gather some friends, read the articles, reflect and start talking.

Christian persecution and suffering

Reading

Read one of the following articles:

- Nazek Matty OP, 'The threat to Christian identity in Iraq'
- Benjamin Kwashi, 'A gospel worth dying for'

Read one of the following passages of Scripture:

- Luke 9:23–27
- 1 Peter 4:12–19, or the whole letter

Questions

1. Have you ever been abused, jeered at, or called names because you go to church and live according to the biblical witness? How did you react?
2. How do you think Christ would have reacted to what you experienced?
3. Who do you know who has suffered because of their Christian faith?
4. In what areas of life, in your family, church, and society, do you most need to stand firm for the good news? What is most difficult and why?

5. How can you be builders rather than destroyers and act as God's agents of transformation in the world today?
6. Pray for persecuted Christians around the world.

Persecution, martyrdom, and the Christian life

Reading

Read one of the following articles:

- [Nesmy Bersot Mvé Nguéma, 'Persecuted for justice's sake'](#)
- [Michael P Jensen, 'The hidden glory of martyrdom'](#)

Read:

- Matthew 5:10
- Romans 6:1–11

Questions

1. Do you see persecution as glorious—or as horrible?
2. What are inappropriate ways for Christians to respond to persecution and suffering?
3. What does it mean to die to self?
4. What does it mean for you to die to self?
5. What difference does the hope of resurrection make for death and suffering here and now?
6. What difference does that hope make for you?

Loving enemies and defending communities

Reading

- [Hwa Yung, 'Martyrdom we can accept, but not genocide!'](#)
- Matthew 5:38–48 and Romans 13:1–17

Questions

1. When ought Christians to endure attacks without fighting back?

2. What does it mean to love your enemies?
3. How can you love your enemies?
4. Is there a time when it is right for Christians to defend their communities?

Suffering and persecution in early Christianity

Reading

- Matthew J Thomas, 'Suffering and persecution in early Christianity'
- *The Epistle to Diognetus*, an anonymous early church writing, quoted in Thomas' article and available via a web search

Questions

1. What do you think about what Ignatius says, that in being killed he is suffering with Christ?
2. Do the Christians described in the *Epistle to Diognetus* sound like your Christian community today?
3. How might the sufferings of Christians serve as the proof of God's presence, bearing witness to the truth of Christ?
4. What do you have to learn from the example of the early church?

Lament in the face of suffering

Reading:

- Yohanna Katanacho, 'A theology of tears: cry with us'
- Lamentations 3, or the whole book

Questions

1. Where is the world falling apart around you? Where is there no comforter? Take time to cry and lament, individually or together.
2. Where around you is there no prophet, no word from God?
3. Where around you is there no hope?
4. Where can good hope be found?

Further reading

Works on persecution and suffering include the following. The authors in this issue of *Word & World* suggested most of these titles. The works come from a range of Christian traditions.

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Early church writings available via web search at sites like www.newadvent.org and www.earlychristianwritings.com:

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- St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Romans*
- St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Smyrneans*
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