

“It Does Not Affect Me” and Other Myths about Religious Persecution

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Jesus said to His disciples: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me” (Matt 5:11). What is the antithesis of religious freedom? The answer is, “religious persecution.” While religious freedom is a gift of God, a mark of His great love for humanity, persecution bears the signature of the Devil.

Persecution is also part of the whole Christian “package,” in much the same way that illness and death are a part of our human heritage. It is a reality we cannot avoid—it is an inevitable by-product of the great cosmic conflict between God and the enemy of truth. The apostle Paul wrote that “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12).

For Christians, though, the inevitability of persecution does not mean we should actively court mistreatment or abuse. A disciple of Jesus, wrote Peter, “...must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it” (1 Pet 3:11).

I often sense a certain level of apathy about the issue of religious persecution when I speak to audiences in North America, Europe, and other countries that have long-standing traditions of protecting human rights. The unspoken thought seems to be, “Why is this relevant to me? Persecution belongs to a time and place far removed from where I live today.”

“Perhaps persecution lies somewhere in the future,” we tell ourselves. “For now, everything is OK.” But is it? Is everything OK for the 200 million Christians who live in countries where the state either fails to protect them from social harassment or actively engages in discrimination or persecution? And let us not forget that perhaps two million of these men, women, and children are our fellow Adventist Church members.

Can we continue to believe that everything is OK when churches are being attacked and burned in East Indonesia, Nigeria, Iraq, Egypt, and India? When believers are killed, pastors assassinated, and people live in fear—simply because of their commitment to be true to God? Yet for those of us who worship in freedom, our unconscious attitude is often, “That’s too bad. But I’m OK. It’s not *my* problem.”

It should come as no surprise to us that those who are persecuted often feel abandoned by their brothers and sisters in Christ. A few years ago, I visited the city of Ambon in Eastern Indonesia where several churches had been burned and thousands of Adventists had fled their home. A local church elder said to me, “When persecution began, our leaders left. We stayed alone.”

I think of another country which I will not name, where religious fanatics had assassinated several church members and had destroyed their churches and houses. When one of my associates visited them three years later, they were still living under tents and meeting each Sabbath under a tree to worship God. What did they say to my associate? “We are alone. We have been forgotten.” Are they alone? Have we forgotten them?

Leira is a young mother and teacher living in a country where religious liberty is limited. One day she watched an Adventist television program and began to read the Bible. Ultimately, she embraced the Adventist faith, knowing that her life would never be the same. Her husband, a university professor, beat her, demanded a divorce, and sued for sole custody of their children. He won. An eyewitness says that the children were taken from her, crying and screaming for their mother.

As I am writing these words I have no news about Leira. But I know that her life is in danger because, in her country, the penalty for abandoning the dominant religion is death. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands,

of brothers and sisters around the world like Leira for whom persecution is a present reality. It is not a story from the past or a prediction for the future. It is a tragedy they must endure *today*.

I want them to know that they're not alone. They have not been forgotten. Our God, who stands with the oppressed, is on their side. And today, we can also choose to stand in solidarity with them. This is both a responsibility and a privilege. Is everything really OK when so many of our brothers and sisters around the world are suffering for their faith? Can we blithely continue to act as if persecution belongs either to the distant past or the distant future? The answer is, "No!" Can we—should we—do something? The answer is, "Yes!"

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